

“Let every soul be subject”: Northern evangelical understandings  
of submission to civil authority, 1763–1863

by

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## **Abstract**

Evangelical Christians represented a growing and influential subset of American Protestantism in the northern colonies of British America at the time of the War for Independence. Almost a century later, when southern states chose to secede from the Union, evangelical Christianity embodied the most vital expression of American religion, having been widely spread across the nation by decades of revivals. Central to their faith was a commitment to the authority of the Bible in every area of life, including political life. The New Testament seemed to command Christians to obey civil authorities. So, why did northern evangelicals overwhelmingly support the rebellion against English rule, but later criticize southern Christians for rebelling against the Union? Or why, on the other hand, were both of these actions not equally rebellious against civil authority? This dissertation argues that northern evangelical Christians employed Romans 13:1-7 between 1763 and 1863 as a political text either to resist or to promote submission to civil authority in pursuit of an America whose greatness as a democratic republic would be defined primarily by its religious character as an evangelical Protestant Christian nation.

The chronological scope of this project spans the century between the end of French and Indian or Seven Years War (1763)—a crucial turning point in Colonial America's sense of identity in relation to Great Britain—and President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (1863)—a crucial turning point in America's sense of identity over the issue of slavery. Thus, the work explores the debate over American identity during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from a prominent religious perspective in light of changing understandings of the concept of submission to civil authority. The author views Romans 13:1-7 as a pivotal New Testament text informing evangelical Christian political theory in America

between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Convictions forged by northern evangelicals in the colonial era regarding America's status as "chosen" by God, and their attempts to construct a Christian democratic republic on this basis in the nineteenth century drove conscientious adherents of biblical authority to debate and periodically reassess the meaning of these verses in the American context. In this way, evangelicals contributed to the development of a concept that historians would later call "American exceptionalism." Northern evangelicals, in particular, hoped to define America's uniqueness by the degree to which those in civil authority reflected and reinforced Protestant Christian values and wedded these to American democratic republican identity. So long as the United States government fostered the attainment of their religious ideal for the nation, northern evangelicals promoted virtually absolute submission to civil authority on the basis of the command, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers," found in Romans 13:1. But when they perceived the state to threaten their goal of a national Christian identity, highly qualified explanations of Romans 13:1 prevailed in northern evangelical pulpits and publications.

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## **Dedication**

To my unfailingly devoted wife and tireless research assistant, Jolene

## Introduction

Methodist minister George Peck (1797-1876) was no novice when it came to publishing religious opinions in the controversial political atmosphere of mid-nineteenth-century America. In the previous three decades of his pastoral career, he had led Methodist publishing concerns as editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, book editor of the church's publishing arm, and, most recently, editor of the weekly New York City newspaper, the *Christian Advocate*.<sup>1</sup> When southern states began to secede from the Union in 1861, he was incensed. He believed their actions to be a clear case of resisting the God-ordained power of civil authority, deliberately ignoring the Apostle Paul's teaching on the subject in Romans 13:1-7. This New Testament passage was understood by evangelical Christians of the time to be the central statement of biblical teaching on the subject of Christian duty to political rulers. It reads:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.<sup>2</sup>

Peck could not understand how so many southerners who professed evangelical faith could act in defiance of biblical authority. Consequently, he determined in a sermon that year "to prove that

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<sup>1</sup> A. F. Chaffee, *History of the Wyoming Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1904), 220-223, HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/pst.000016364844>.

<sup>2</sup> Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American Protestants used the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible exclusively. For consistency with primary texts, it will be used throughout this essay for all Bible quotations. Spelling and punctuation have been retained.

the seceding states [were] guilty of the very *crime* which the apostle condemns.”<sup>3</sup> Pastor W. R. Gordon of the Reformed Dutch Church in Schraalenburgh, New Jersey, agreed. Citing the same scriptural basis in a sermon published that year, Gordon declared, “This is the *crime* of high treason that covers and saturates the whole of our Southern Confederacy . . . and as the text is a divine proclamation against treason, it is a guide to the pulpit in our expositions of the duties we owe to the State and Government under which we live.”<sup>4</sup> But the definitive positions in applying the Bible’s teaching on political submission taken by these clergymen and many others like them at the outset of the American Civil War (1861-1865) belies a far more complicated history of northern evangelical understandings of submission to civil authority.

Both Peck and Gordon were part of an evangelical heritage whose views on submission to civil authority had shifted over the century prior to their diatribes against their southern—especially evangelical—brethren. Peck even had direct ancestors who promoted and participated in the American War for Independence from Great Britain.<sup>5</sup> This would have been unremarkable for many northern evangelical families in the mid-nineteenth century. Few historians would dispute the assessment of contemporary observer James Thatcher in his 1775 *Military Journal* that “the clergymen of New England are, almost without exception, advocates of Whig principles; there are a few instances only of the separation of a minister from his people in

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<sup>3</sup> George Peck, *Our Country: Its Trial and Its Triumph* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1865), Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/ourcountryitstri00peckiala/>, 27. Emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> William R. Gordon, *Reliance on God, our Hope of Victory, A Sermon preached on the day of fasting and prayer, Sept. 26, 1861* (New York: John A. Gray, 1861), 9, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/relianceongodour00gord/>. Emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> “Jesse Peck, my grandfather . . . served as a volunteer in the Revolutionary War, and died while the contest was still undecided, leaving a large family with no means of support save their own exertions. Three of his seven sons entered the army.” George Peck, *The Life and Times of Rev. George Peck, D.D.* (New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1874), 10, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/lifetimesofrevge00peck/>.

consequence of a disagreement in political sentiment.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as early as the year of the Stamp Act (1765), Massachusetts evangelical Congregational minister Andrew Eliot asserted quite the opposite of what northern evangelicals such as Peck and Gordon would claim almost one-hundred years later. In the face of a tyrannical government, he declared, “submission, if it can be avoided, is so far from being a duty, that it is a crime.”<sup>7</sup>

Conflict with civil authorities has been a routine experience for the followers of Christ since the founding of Christianity in the first century A.D. According to the Gospels, in fact, the execution of Jesus of Nazareth was justified by some based on his supposed claim to be a rival of the Roman emperor.<sup>8</sup> As a result, Christians have commonly looked to the New Testament to guide them regarding their responsibility toward civil authorities. One incident from the life of Christ has been repeated by Christians with some frequency in the history of church-state relations. The *Gospel of Matthew* records that Jewish leaders asked Jesus whether or not the Jews should pay tribute to Rome. Using the image of Caesar stamped on a coin as indicative of ownership, he answered, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.”<sup>9</sup> Various New Testament texts exhort Christians with such commands as “Submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake,” and “Honour the king.”

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<sup>6</sup> James Thacher, *A Military Journal during the American Revolutionary War, from 1775 to 1783; Describing Interesting Events and Transactions of this Period*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Boston: Cottons and Barnard, 1827), 23, Gale, Cengage Learning, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY112412929&srchtp=a&ste=14/>.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Eliot, *A Sermon Preached Before His Excellency Francis Bernard, Esq; Governor, The Honorable His Majesty’s Council and the Honorable House of Representatives of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay in New England, May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1765* (Boston: Green and Russel, 1765), 38, Google Books, [https://books.google.com/books?id=SexbAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=SexbAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false) (accessed January 11, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> New Testament Gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of the province of Judaea, may be found in Mt.27:11-26, Mk.15:1-15, Lk.23:1-25 and Jn.18:28-19:16. See also, Marcel Le Glay et al., *A History of Rome*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. with new material by David Cherry (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 232-235.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 22:21.

Yet, when pressed by authorities to restrict their proclamation of the Christian faith—contrary to what they believed to be the clear will of God—the very apostle who penned those commands vehemently insisted, “We must obey God rather than men.”<sup>10</sup>

The longest and most prominent passage that addresses Christians on the subject of civil authority is found in the Apostle Paul’s letter to Christians in Rome, an appropriate destination since it was the seat of first-century political rule in the Roman Empire. Paul used a present, passive, imperative verb in Romans 13:1, grammatically conveying to the reader limited agency in the matter of civil submission: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers.”<sup>11</sup> Little or no debate has surrounded the meaning of “the higher powers” insofar as the phrase describes political, governmental authority. British New Testament scholar T. L. Carter comments, “In the opening verses of Rom. 13 Paul offers what at first sight appears to be an uncompromising endorsement of political authority.” His essay goes on to suggest the plausibility of Paul having intended his commendation of civil authority as linguistic irony considering the abuses that were sustained under Emperor Nero at the time.<sup>12</sup> More commonly, however, the meaning of “be subject” (Gr., υποτασσεσθω) has been variously understood by Christian interpreters on a continuum from absolute to qualified submission. From their pulpits and in their publications, northern evangelicals employed Romans 13:1-7 as a political text either to resist or promote submission to civil authority in pursuit of an America whose exceptionalism would be defined primarily by its identity as an evangelical Protestant Christian nation.

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Peter 2:13, 17; Acts 5:29.

<sup>11</sup> Fritz Reinecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, trans. and ed. Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976, 1980), 377.

<sup>12</sup> T. L. Carter, “The Irony of Romans 13,” *Novum Testamentum* 46 (July 2004), under “JStor,” <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1561585> (accessed February 4, 2011), 209. For a contemporary discussion of ways in which Romans 13 has been understood to prevent Christian opposition to oppressive governments, see Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 3-24.



### **Defining an Evangelical Focus Group**

Over the past several decades, numerous scholars in American religious history have demonstrated the value of distinguishing evangelical Christians from other Protestants in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of American culture.<sup>13</sup> This study explores the interplay of commitments to biblical authority and civil authority in American evangelical Christianity. Thus, I examine northern evangelical Christian understandings of the New Testament concept of submission to civil authority in the context of American political developments between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. But I also probe the space between—the medium in which these commitments intersected—suggesting that evangelical understandings of biblical and civil authority were shaped by their growing valuation of the principles embodied in America’s republican system.

Evangelicals Christians made up an especially large and fast-growing segment of American Protestantism during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and though they certainly did not constitute the whole, their influence was both geographically wide and theologically substantial. But in order to accurately differentiate evangelical from other Protestant views and draw valid and useful conclusions for American historiography in the period, one must overcome two obstacles: definition and identification. As two specialists in the field of American religious history admitted nearly thirty years ago, “The problem of definition is a knotty one.”<sup>14</sup> These two historians, Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, nevertheless

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<sup>13</sup> Gordon S. Wood, “Religion in the American Revolution,” and Daniel Walker Howe, “Protestantism, Voluntarism, and Personal Identity in Antebellum America,” in D.G. Hart and Harry S. Stout, eds., *New Directions in American Religious History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 173-198, 206-227; Catherine A. Brekus, “The Work We Have to Do: Mark Noll’s Contributions to Writing the History of American Christianity,” *Fides et Historia* 48, no. 2 (2016): 23-28.

<sup>14</sup> Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 302n9.

identified a set of theological beliefs that evangelicals across centuries hold in common: “(1) the Bible is the ultimate authority for faith and practice in the religious life; (2) Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate; and (3) eternal salvation comes through personal faith in Jesus Christ and his work on the cross and leads to a spiritually transformed life (many call this being ‘born again’).”<sup>15</sup> Pierard and Linder concluded that, while evangelicals can at times be hard to distinguish from other Protestants, a combination of characteristic traits helps identify them.<sup>16</sup> My research is based on a similar approach, though I find it helpful to consider the distinguishing characteristics of evangelical Christians in reverse order.

First, evangelicals placed a unique emphasis on experiential conversion through faith in Christ, and demonstrated a passion to propagate the gospel in order to transform both individuals and society. They saw themselves as restoring the true Christian doctrine of salvation. Instead of viewing salvation as a gradual process by means of the graces of the church and moral works, they emphasized the “good news” (gospel) that God had made redemption available for every individual on the basis of grace because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup> Most importantly, individuals receive that grace through one conscious act of faith in Christ, resulting in the “new birth.” Evangelicals understood salvation in terms of a personal conversion

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 302-303n9.

<sup>16</sup> While it is necessary to establish a working definition for “evangelical Christianity” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, conceptualizing evangelical identity is hardly the focus of my study, which will for the most part lean upon the solid work of other scholars in the field of American Religious History. For example, W. R. Ward, *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History, 1670-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart, eds., *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008); D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); and Randall Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> The term “gospel” is a transliteration of the Greek term, το εὐαγγέλιον, which has commonly been translated as “good news.” See Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 318.

experience that occurs as a result of the preaching of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit on an individual at a particular point in time. Thus, for instance, Anglican evangelist George Whitefield was famously noted for challenging audiences to grapple personally with the Philippian jailer's question in Acts 16:30, "What must I do to be saved?" And, in order to "win souls" on his many travels, the Baptist preacher Isaac Backus (1724-1806) was repeatedly preoccupied in his diary with a necessity to "improve" on providentially arranged circumstances such as illnesses, injuries and deaths by preaching the gospel.<sup>18</sup>

Backus's notion of improvement meant taking advantage of poignant moments in life to preach the gospel and call people to experience personal conversion through faith in Christ. But it also hinted at another underlying urge of evangelicals, which was their desire to improve society. Eighteenth-century itinerate revivalists of the Great Awakening were instrumental in spreading evangelical faith throughout the colonies, especially in New England, with the secondary intent of shaping the cultural and religious identity of America. In the nineteenth century, revivals of the Second Great Awakening would expand the geographical reach of evangelical Christianity west and south across the growing nation, and increase the association of evangelical revival with social reform. Evangelicals were almost all supportive to one degree or another of the periodic revivals that swept America between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries.

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<sup>18</sup> Daniel G. Reid, ed., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 413-415; Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960), 200; Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991); Isaac Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, vol. 1: 1741-1764, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1979), 7, 81, 521; Isaac Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, vol. 2: 1765-1785, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1979), 594, 665, 669, 698.

Especially significant to the present discussion is the characteristic trait that evangelicals were resolutely orthodox in their view of Scripture. The Enlightenment had begun to erode confidence in biblical Christianity among many Protestants, but evangelical Christians believed the Bible to be authoritative in all matters of faith and practice, and its proclamation to be the means of bringing sinners to faith in Jesus Christ. They were committed to the centrality of biblical authority as the foundation of Christian faith and practice in an even more determined and exclusive manner than other theologically conservative Christians. Protestants in general had for centuries understood this commitment to distinguish them from the Roman Catholic Church, which acknowledged other forms of doctrinal authority alongside the Bible (e.g., Church Councils or Papal decrees).<sup>19</sup> But with the growing influence of Enlightenment rationalism in the eighteenth century and theological liberalism in the nineteenth, evangelical commitment to the singular authority of the Bible as revelation from God further set them apart from other Protestant interpretations of the faith. Thus, in response to contemporary challenges, evangelical pastors and theologians mounted a tenacious defense of scripturally revealed doctrines, such as the virgin birth and deity of Jesus Christ, as well as his bodily resurrection from the dead. Based on this distinguishing characteristic, it will be helpful to bear in mind that evangelical believers would presumably oppose Christians who modified for the sake of political concerns what they perceived to be the plain teaching of the Bible on the issue of submission to civil authority.

Notwithstanding their strong commonalities, evangelical Christians were not monolithic either in doctrine or practice. Evangelical churches sometimes held widely divergent views on

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<sup>19</sup> David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz, *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 45-46, 62, 81-84, 107-108; Mark Greengrass, "The theology and liturgy of Reformed Christianity," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 6: Reform and Expansion, 1500-1660, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 104-111. See also, Robert D. Linder, *The Reformation Era* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 30-32.

subjects ranging from predestination to modes of baptism. Over this period, for instance, increasing numbers of evangelicals discarded the “covenantal” convictions of narrower New England Congregational perspective that bound church and state in formal establishment.<sup>20</sup> Yale Divinity School Professor of American Christianity Harry S. Stout succinctly captures Covenant Theology’s essential alliance of church and state in colonial New England in his classic study, *The New England Soul*: “In this view God entered into covenants with nations, as well as with individuals, and promised that he would uphold them by his providential might if they would acknowledge no other sovereign and observe the terms of obedience contained in his Word.”<sup>21</sup> Paradoxically, despite gradually shedding allegiance to this conception of church-state relations after independence, most northern evangelicals retained or even expanded their confidence that God had a unique place for the United States of America in His plan of the ages. This retention

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<sup>20</sup> “The First Amendment to the United States Constitution, with its provision that ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ took effect in 1791. At that time, five of the nation’s fourteen states (Vermont joined the Union in 1791) provided for tax support of ministers, and those five plus seven others maintained religious tests for state office. Only Virginia and Rhode Island enjoyed the sort of ‘separation of church and state’ that Americans now take for granted—government providing no tax money for churches and posing no religious conditions for participation in public life.” Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 144. See also, John D. Cushing, “Notes on Disestablishment in Massachusetts, 1780-1833,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 26, no. 2 (April 1969), under “JStor,” <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1918674> (accessed May 28, 2014); John Witte, Jr., “‘A Most Mild and Equitable Establishment of Religion’: John Adams and the Massachusetts Experiment,” *Journal of Church and State*, 41, no. 2 (Spring 1999), under “ProQuest,” <http://search.proquest.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/docview/230025049?accountid=11789> (accessed May 28, 2014); Chris Beneke, “The Free Market and the Founders’ Approach to Church-State Relations,” *Journal of Church and State*, 52 no. 2 (Spring 2010), under “ProQuest,” <http://search.proquest.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/docview/754150132?accountid=11789>. Along with the dramatic proliferation of evangelical churches in the first decades of the nineteenth century came a corresponding decrease of officially sponsored State churches. Disestablishment came to the last holdout, Massachusetts, in 1833.

<sup>21</sup> Covenant Theology understood God’s relation to the church in terms similar to that of his covenant with Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures. This view was foundational to Puritan views of America as a nation uniquely chosen by God. For a non-theological interpretation of covenant values in Puritan New England, see Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall, “Family Strategies and Religious Practice: Baptism and The Lord’s Supper in Early New England,” in *Colonial America: Essays in Politics and Social Development*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Stanley N. Katz et al. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 215-232.

plays a crucial role in my argument regarding evolving American evangelical understandings of submission to civil authority.

American evangelical Christians did not always self-identify as such. They were more likely to describe themselves according to church membership. Some churches were recognized as evangelical even if the term was lacking in their titles (e.g., Methodist Episcopal and Baptist). The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., divided over various concerns with regard to the polity and theology of their church (e.g., “Old School” and “New School”), but retained evangelicals in each of the new Assemblies.<sup>22</sup> Other churches maintained their unity despite the presence of evangelicals and non-evangelicals within their membership through most of the nineteenth century (e.g. Congregational). There are only two certain means of identifying evangelical Christians from available sources. Either they must be formally associated by membership or, better, leadership in a certifiably evangelical church or organization, or they must have left a written record declaring their religious convictions in a way that is distinguishably “evangelical” according to the parameters of its definition. A less certain but equally valid method of classification relies on the testimony of a contemporary figure to pinpoint the religious beliefs of an individual. The term evangelical, therefore, is used in this study to describe a diverse

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<sup>22</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, “Turning Points in American Presbyterian History, Part 6: Old School Presbyterianism, 1838,” *New Horizons* (The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2012), [http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article\\_id=21](http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=21). See also, “[New School] Presbyterian Statistics,” *Daily National Intelligencer* 14 (Washington, DC), 16 August 1859: n.p., Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=&docId=GT3017823843&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0> (accessed April 18, 2012); “Old School General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church,” *New York Herald* (New York, NY), 23 May 1860: 7, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=PublicationSearchForm&docId=GT3003682965&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0> (accessed April 18, 2012); “The Old School Presbyterian General Assembly,” *New York Herald* (New York, NY), 31 May 1860: 7, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=PublicationSearchForm&docId=GT3003683594&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0> (accessed April 18, 2012).

assortment of Protestant Christians in America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They were not a particular denomination of Christians, but rather an understanding of the Christian faith that spanned portions of most Protestant denominations.

Nevertheless, despite sometimes significant differences between various evangelical groups, these Christians recognized a bond between them that often defied denominational and even national boundaries, preferring to identify with one another on the basis of their evangelical confession. The American Tract Society gathered evangelical Christians of various churches into one evangelistically motivated publishing association. At its first Annual Meeting in New York in 1826, ministers from Moravian, Dutch Reformed, Baptist, Episcopal, Congregational and Presbyterian churches advanced resolutions that passed. The *Vermont Chronicle* reported that “The exercises of this meeting were rendered peculiarly interesting from the great cordiality and entire harmony of sentiment and feeling which prevailed among Evangelical Christians from different religious denominations; and the glow of Christian affection which united their hearts in love of the object before them, as a means of honoring God their Redeemer in the salvation of perishing men.”<sup>23</sup> The exceptional unity exhibited at the close of the first year of the Society’s operation would be challenged as time went on, especially by the issue of slavery in the decade just before the Civil War. Nevertheless, this report illustrates that evangelical Christians saw themselves as preservers of the true Christian doctrine of salvation, regardless of their various church affiliations. Similarly, when Peck criticized English support for the Confederacy in his

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<sup>23</sup> N.Y. Obs, “American Tract Society,” *Vermont Chronicle* 1 (Bellows Falls, VT), 19 May 1826: 22, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com/ncnp/state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DateAscend&tabID=T003&prodId=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchId=R1&searchType=PublicationSearchForm&currentPosition=15&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2CUS%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918260519%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C39%29%22Vermont+Chronicle+%28Bellows+Falls%2C+Vt%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTI\\_PAGE\\_DOCUMENT&userGroupName=ksu&inPS=true&contentSet=LTO&&docId=&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3012761256&contentSet=UDVIN&callistoContentSet=UDVIN&docPage=article&hilite=y&tabLimiterIndex=&tabLimiterValue=](http://find.galegroup.com/ncnp/state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DateAscend&tabID=T003&prodId=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R1&searchType=PublicationSearchForm&currentPosition=15&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2CUS%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918260519%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C39%29%22Vermont+Chronicle+%28Bellows+Falls%2C+Vt%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTI_PAGE_DOCUMENT&userGroupName=ksu&inPS=true&contentSet=LTO&&docId=&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3012761256&contentSet=UDVIN&callistoContentSet=UDVIN&docPage=article&hilite=y&tabLimiterIndex=&tabLimiterValue=) (accessed January 15, 2017).

1861 sermon quoted above, he nonetheless identified with British “evangelical Christians which maintain ‘a godly discipline,’ are orthodox in essentials, and recognize each other as a part of the family of Christ.”<sup>24</sup> It is noteworthy that Peck avoided labeling those in England with whom he found common cause as “Methodist,” like himself. Instead, his depiction enumerated shared evangelical characteristics. Those characteristics even caused him to discount potential national enmity and confess his shared familial ties with British evangelicals. This religious self-awareness did not eliminate the tendency toward denominationalism or nationalism, but ran as a current uniting those of “like precious faith” in the various and proliferating denominations, societies and associations of nineteenth-century American Protestantism.<sup>25</sup>

### **Dissertation Argument**

The chronological scope of this project spans the century between the end of French and Indian or Seven Years War (1763)—a crucial turning point in Colonial America’s sense of identity in relation to Great Britain—and President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (1863)—a crucial turning point in America’s sense of identity over the issue of slavery. A simplistic, but helpful comparison of these chronological “bookends” of my research can be stated in the question, why did northern evangelicals overwhelmingly support the rebellion against English rule, but later criticize southern Christians for rebelling against the Union? Or why, according to the New Testament admonition found in Romans 13:1-7, were both of these actions not equally rebellious against civil authority?

This study views Romans 13:1-7 as a pivotal New Testament text informing evangelical Christian political theory in America between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. In fact, the

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<sup>24</sup> Peck, *Our Country*, 53.

<sup>25</sup> The phrase, “like precious faith,” was borrowed from the Authorized (King James) Version of Second Peter 1:1 and used commonly among American evangelical Christians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to describe individuals and churches sharing evangelical commitment.



convictions northern evangelicals forged in the colonial era regarding America's status as "chosen" by God, and their attempts to construct a Christian democratic republic on this basis in the nineteenth century drove conscientious adherents of biblical authority to debate and periodically reassess the meaning of these verses in the American context. As a result, I argue that northern evangelical ministers and laymen employed Romans 13 as a political text either to resist or promote submission to civil authority in pursuit of an America whose greatness as a democratic republic would be defined primarily by its status as a Christian nation. By "pursuit of an America whose greatness would be defined primarily by its status as a Christian nation," I mean that northern evangelicals sought to define what historians much later would term "American exceptionalism" by the degree to which those in civil authority reflected and reinforced Protestant Christian values and wedded these to American democratic republican identity. Northern evangelical Christians consistently distinguished between the spheres of civil and biblical authority and understood the command to "be subject unto the higher powers" in light of that distinction. So long as the government fostered the attainment of their religious ideal for the nation, northern evangelicals promoted virtually absolute submission to civil authority on the basis of the command of Romans 13:1. But when they perceived the state to threaten their goal of a national Christian identity, highly qualified explanations of Romans 13:1 prevailed in northern evangelical pulpits and publications.

Speaking of the "years of crisis from 1763 to 1776," intellectual historian Bernard Bailyn concluded that "long popular, though hitherto inconclusive, controversial, and imperfectly harmonized, ideas about the world and America's place in it were fused into a comprehensive view, unique in its moral and intellectual appeal." He went on to argue, "It is the development of this view to the point of overwhelming persuasiveness to the majority of American leaders and

the meaning this view gave to the events of the time, and not simply an accumulation of grievances, that explains the origins of the American Revolution.”<sup>26</sup> The resilience of popular belief in America’s status as a “chosen” nation has been demonstrated time and again in American history. Bailyn’s explanation of the “overwhelming persuasiveness” of such a “comprehensive view” contributes an important framework for the current study. This popular and persuasive viewpoint on America and its unique place in the world also overwhelmed alternate Christian views of submission to civil authority that would have been less supportive of the Patriot cause, and, in the process, influenced evangelical understandings of the New Testament text of Romans 13:1-7. New Testament teaching regarding submission to civil authority, with Romans 13 as its central text, still contributed formatively to the development of northern evangelical Christian political theory. But, by accepting the Puritan view of British America’s identity as a chosen people and then adopting republicanism as the ideal form of government, northern evangelicals were forced to reassess the meaning of this passage and make room for the American revolt against England.<sup>27</sup>

After independence, however, and with the ratification of the Constitution of the United States (1789) and the Bill of Rights (1791), debate among northern evangelicals as to the proper application of biblical submission to civil authority continued to bubble up during moments of national crisis (e.g., the Whiskey Rebellion, 1791–1794) or when the religious core of America’s exceptionalism seemed threatened (e.g., the election in 1800 of rationalist sceptic and deist,

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<sup>26</sup> Bernard Bailyn and Jane N. Garrett, eds. *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776*, vol. 1: 1750–1765 (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 20.

<sup>27</sup> Liam Atchison, “The English Interpret St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans Chapter Thirteen: From God Save the King to God Help the King, 1532-1649” (PhD diss., Kansas State University, 2007), ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304844431> (accessed May 20, 2013). Atchison argues similarly that English Protestants reinterpreted this salient New Testament political text in the decades leading up to 1649 to allow for rebellion against the King.

Thomas Jefferson). Overall, the early national period witnessed a subtle shift toward evangelical understandings of Romans 13 that favored the status quo and a more conservative application of the principle of submission to civil authority. Carried into the nineteenth-century, confidence in America's special place in the world joined a stream of popular evangelical eschatology (postmillennialism) and waves of revival conversions to foster efforts by evangelical Christians to construct a "Christian nation" in keeping with its vision.

America's debate over slavery heated up in the 1840s and 1850s, fueled in no small measure by social reformers spawned by revivals during the first half of the century collectively known as the Second Great Awakening.<sup>28</sup> At that time, evangelical abolitionists reinvigorated a "higher law" theory of spiritual authority that had been applied by some of their English forefathers to revolt against Charles I in the seventeenth century.<sup>29</sup> The theory impacted the way many evangelicals interpreted the meaning of passages such as that found in Romans 13, and again modified their perceived responsibilities with regard to submission to civil authority. John Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in 1859 can be viewed as the high water mark of this wave of evangelical resistance to civil authority based on higher law. Then, with the secession crisis deepening after the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, northern evangelicals reapplied the force of Romans 13:1 ("let every soul be subject") in light of the South's "rebellion" and reaffirmed America's united national Christian identity in order to compel submission and justify the use of federal troops to preserve the Union and, eventually, to loose slavery's moral chains upon it.

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<sup>28</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, "Religion and Politics in the Antebellum North," in *Religion and American Politics from the Colonial Period to the Present*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Mark A. Noll and Luke E. Harlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 121-143; John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay, eds., *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998); Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957, 1980).

<sup>29</sup> Atchison, "The English Interpret St. Paul's Epistle," 23.

## **Survey of Secondary Literature**

It will be helpful to clarify at the outset that the current study does not represent a direct contribution to the copious literature on Christian views of war. While the notion of Christian attitudes toward civil authority logically intersects with theological and historical expositions on this theme, the seemingly dual loyalties expected of Christians to spiritual and civil authority are not challenged merely by periods of armed conflict. Moreover, this is not strictly a study of American evangelical political involvement between the Revolution and the Civil War, though my analysis most assuredly bears upon the subject. Scholars have written extensively on nineteenth-century American political development and some of this literature attempts to explain the place of evangelical Christians in the maturing American democracy.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, my focus on *submission to civil authority* as a discreet topic of scholarly investigation fundamentally addresses the understanding and development of Christian responsibility toward governmental power. The current study does not seek to answer *how* evangelical Christians involved themselves in the young nation's democratic process or *what* impact such involvement had on historical outcomes. Rather, the question explored here is *why* a definably contiguous segment of American evangelical Christianity—northern evangelical Christians—acted in seemingly contradictory ways toward the authority of the state during this period.

Twentieth-century scholars of American religious history pioneered a growing corpus of work exploring the political views and social impact of New England's churches and ministers.

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<sup>30</sup> See for example, Richard J. Cardarwine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); McKivigan and Snay, eds., *Antebellum Debate*; Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Noll and Harlow, eds., *Religion and American Politics*; and Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). Other works that substantially address American evangelical political involvement in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are well represented in the notes and bibliography of my dissertation.

In *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (1928, 1958), longtime Professor of History at the Women's College of Duke University, Alice M. Baldwin, argued that the clergy served throughout the colonial period to give New Englanders a moral-religious underpinning for the concepts of liberty and Natural Rights.<sup>31</sup> Her thorough analysis of sources demonstrated the role of sermons and religious pamphlets in conveying political ideas, especially by transmitting a language of opposition to tyranny and support for constitutional rights from seventeenth-century England to eighteenth-century colonial America. Despite its age, *The New England Clergy* continues to be cited regularly by recent scholars. But Baldwin does not differentiate between the views of evangelicals and other New England Protestants with regard either to their use of the Bible in political theory or their adoption of the Patriot cause. Moreover, despite the broad examination of concepts of government in clerical writings, her work gives little attention to the question of Christian submission to civil authority.

A number of significant works since Baldwin reintroduced the centrality of pulpit literature to scholarly discussion have examined the salience of published sermons in the exchange of republican and revolutionary ideas in eighteenth-century colonial British America. In 1965, Bailyn edited *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776*. Intended to reach four volumes, the work republished politically oriented booklets that represent, in the editor's well-founded opinion, "much of the most important and characteristic writing" of the American Revolution.<sup>32</sup> As noted below, the collection will constitute a portion of the primary source material examined for the present study, but the seven chapter, two-hundred page "General Introduction" in volume one deserves attention as a secondary source. Published sermons—

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<sup>31</sup> Alice M. Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1928, 1958).

<sup>32</sup> Bailyn and Garrett, eds., *Pamphlets*, vol. 1, 3.

typically commemorative—formed a critical component of the pamphlet literature in Bailyn’s analysis. Of particular relevance to the current study is the author’s emphasis on the role that the “disposition of power” played in colonial American political theory. According to Bailyn, “What gave transcendent importance to the aggressiveness of power was the fact that its natural prey, its necessary victim, was liberty, or law, or right.”<sup>33</sup> This emphasis on right and wrong applications of civil power by colonists debating their proper relation to England helps highlight why evangelicals often found it necessary to comment on the biblical meaning of submission to civil authority. While Bailyn did not address the subject directly, the sources he collected point to such concerns among colonial evangelicals.

Yale Professor of American Christianity Harry S. Stout casts a wider net than Baldwin in his comprehensive study of sermons, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (1986). Stout gathered and examined printed sermons of the regular preaching schedule of New England clergy from scattered archival collections—not just commemorative publications such as those given on election or fast days—to demonstrate how the sermon functioned as a vehicle for cultural ideas. Beginning with the weekly sermons of colonial New England, Stout revealed how “religion came to permeate a national identity at its deepest cultural and intellectual levels.”<sup>34</sup> His work acknowledged that Puritanism no longer functioned as a way of life in the eighteenth century, yet Stout’s findings validated Sydney

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>34</sup> Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 10.

Ahlstrom's earlier generalization that "Puritanism provided the moral and religious background of fully 85 percent of the people who declared their independence in 1776."<sup>35</sup>

As seminal as the above three works remain to understanding the relevance of religion in colonial and Revolutionary American political development, they are limited in significant ways. First, each author concentrates on the narrow topical scope of Revolutionary thought and developments. While crucial attention is devoted to earlier colonial developments, Baldwin's, Bailyn's and Stout's works find fulfillment in the cultural and intellectual foundations of American independence from England. This formative event does not in itself, however, satisfactorily encompass let alone explain the range of American evangelical applications of the principle of submission to civil authority. Second, these works explore broad political theories that do not explain shifting evangelical assessments of what constitutes legitimate opposition to civil authority. Third, they focus on the Puritan or Congregational heritage of Christianity but have not been accompanied by scholarly attention on the—sometimes subset, sometimes superset—classification of northern evangelical Christians. And finally, they acknowledge religion's contribution to American political development, but tend to focus on social factors to explain why Christian thought—especially as delivered in sermons—influenced colonists' political theories, rather than focusing on how cultural ideas impacted evangelical Protestant understanding of biblical teaching.

Even when the salience of the biblical text has been acknowledged and capably scrutinized in works whose scope extends into the nineteenth century, the influence of the Old Testament has been emphasized to the neglect of potentially formative New Testament political texts. A recent example is Israeli historian Eran Shalev's outstanding monograph on the primacy

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<sup>35</sup> Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

of the Bible in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American thought entitled, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (2013). Shalev concurs with other scholars who have shown that the Bible dominated American spiritual, intellectual and political speech between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, but further argues that its political application was dominated by the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures). My work builds on the solid foundation historians such as Shalev have lain concerning the Bible's prominence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American culture and politics as well as on his contention that American Christians (especially evangelicals) sought to construct America as a new Israel of God. But I offer a corrective in that I contest Shalev's assertion that American evangelicals viewed the New Testament as unsuitable "for explicitly political purposes."<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, I will show that the authority of New Testament passages—especially Romans 13:1-7—both shaped evangelical attitudes toward civil authority and were shaped by American political development between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars.

Baylor Professor Thomas S. Kidd's concise work, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (2010), strives to accomplish an expansive goal: to answer in historical terms the question of religion's proper role in American public discourse and politics. Kidd concentrates on a single aspect of American religious history, that of "religious freedom."<sup>37</sup> Running throughout Kidd's examination of a wide selection of voices and opinions about religion in late-eighteenth-century America is the longstanding and congenial relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Baptist evangelist John Leland of Danbury, Connecticut. Kidd's work points to an early juncture at which American democratic values prompted soul-searching

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<sup>36</sup> Shalev, *American Zion*, 101.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 243.



among evangelical Christians as to the limits of submission to civil authority. He suggests that the election of the deist Christian critic was the final step in the Revolution's removal of religious qualifications for public office.<sup>38</sup> According to the author, relations between Jefferson and the Baptists illustrate how secular and evangelical Christian views came together in the American Revolution. Even though the personal religious sentiments of Leland and Jefferson could hardly have been more different, they cooperated in efforts to promote a view of religious freedom at state and federal levels that was radical for the time. Kidd does not, however, reveal the extent to which the debate that raged prior to Jefferson's election regarding his religion (or lack thereof) prompted evangelicals to reconsider the meaning of New Testament texts such as Romans 13:1-7. In *Catholics, Slaveholders and the Dilemma of American Evangelicalism* (2010), historian of European and American religion, W. Jason Wallace, chronologically advances the debate about what role religious convictions should play in a free society. At the same time, his work contributes a methodological example of separately identifying northern and southern evangelicals for purposes of analysis, and he points to divisions among them regarding "the correct interpretation of the Bible with regard to social and political issues."<sup>39</sup> Yet Wallace's helpful reconstruction of arguments over the application of Scripture in the antebellum slavery debate misses almost entirely the struggle among evangelicals pursuant to biblical and civil authority.

Historian Nathan O. Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989) is more expansive in its interpretive potential for scholars of nineteenth-century American religious history than either Kidd's or Wallace's works. Hatch argues persuasively for the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>39</sup> W. Jason Wallace, *Catholics, Slaveholders and the Dilemma of American Evangelicalism, 1835-1860* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 3, 6.

interconnectedness of the “democratization” of American evangelical Christianity and American political life between 1780 and 1830. His work bears strongly on the portion of this study that deals with northern evangelical views in the early republic. Hatch shows that the shift from classical republicanism to Jacksonian democracy was played out primarily on a religious stage of notable vitality and relevance to American civil society. Still, though he vaguely references, among uncertainties of the time, that people confronted “organized factions speaking and writing against civil authority,” Hatch fails to contextualize such opposition in relation to evangelical understandings of biblical and civil authority. Criticizing what he understood to be misguided interpretations of the Second Great Awakening that made it too decisive as an abstract historical actor, Hatch complains that a tendency to rely on “revivalism as a principle agent of change has obscured the achievements of flesh-and-blood leaders and their dramatic strategies to forge new movements.”<sup>40</sup> The present study will seek to disclose how and why some of these “flesh-and-blood leaders” of the revivals found in the New Testament both justification and cultural courage to resist civil authority and, as he rightly assesses, to function as radicals not only in a religious context, but in American socio-political development. In this context, Keith J. Hardman’s *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (1987) and Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe’s *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (1996) provide insightful studies into the broader impact of this most influential revivalist of the Second Great Awakening. But, while Hardman provided the more definitive biography of Finney, neither of these authors satisfactorily explain Finney’s conflicted opinions about the violence that abolitionism incited, let alone the willingness of his fellow evangelicals—such as the New York

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<sup>40</sup> Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 222 cf. 6.

businessmen Arthur and Lewis Tappan—to entertain civil rebellion in order to advance the abolitionist cause.

Literature covering evangelical involvement in the abolitionist movement is plentiful. In 1998, historians John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay edited a fine collection of essays covering *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery* and in the succeeding year published *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America*. Because they are especially focused on the intersection of politics and violence associated with abolitionists, their works represent relevant scholarship for this project. Supplemental to these, chapters four and five of my work make explicit the connections between biblical views of submission to civil authority and the possibility—from evangelical perspectives—of violent resistance to slavery, an American social institution that most northern evangelical Christians viewed as evil. Historian and pastor Louis A. DeCaro, Jr.’s scholarly biography, *Fire from the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown* (2002), offers a recent assessment of this iconic—and violent—abolitionist. John Brown’s effort to free southern slaves by means of a violent incursion supplies a crucial case study of how one evangelical Christian navigated the line between submission to civil authority and biblical authority. DeCaro’s study embodies the best contemporary synthesis of Brown’s actions and his religion. Yet, again, the author only peripherally addresses the interplay of biblical teaching and civil authority in Brown’s decision making.

Oxford Professor of American History Richard J. Carwardine’s expansive survey of the same period, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (1993, 1997), scrutinizes evangelical Christianity’s political views, aspirations and involvement in the two decades before the American Civil War. Carwardine argues that evangelical Christians deserve a prominent

place in the historiography of the antebellum years because of their role in shaping American political culture. His study is thorough and lucid. Deeply insightful of both religion and politics in mid-nineteenth-century America, the author lacks the kind of accusative tone bordering on vitriol that permeates University of North Carolina Professor David Goldfield's treatment of evangelical Christianity's culpability for the outbreak of war in his otherwise engaging book, *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation* (2011). Among its relevance to the present work, *Evangelicals and Politics* contributes to a definition of evangelical Christianity and specifically identifies northern evangelicals in the nineteenth century. More importantly, however, Carwardine provides an understanding of how evangelical Christians shaped the broader American political culture of the mid-nineteenth century. But the usefulness of his study for political context also suggests its limits in exploring specific elements of evangelical civil engagement. My work will clarify a central cause of shifting evangelical attitudes toward civil authority in the maturing American democratic system.<sup>41</sup>

### **Primary Sources**

Along with its outstanding introduction (mentioned above), *Pamphlets of the American Revolution* provides a readily available source of re-published primary documents. This collection of Revolutionary pamphlets includes published sermons from the period that address topics of relevance to the Patriot cause from an evangelical perspective. According to Bailyn, just because the sermons were prepared for original publication in the context of special events, they ought not to be dismissed as unreliable witnesses to the intellectual origins of revolutionary thought. "Such commemorative orations were stylized," he argues, "but in the heat of

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<sup>41</sup> Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, xv, 44; David Goldfield, *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 1, 3, 5.

controversy the old forms took on new vigor, new relevance and meaning: some of the resulting pamphlets of this type have remarkable force and originality.”<sup>42</sup> Other useful compilations of published Christian and evangelical perspectives on politics and government include *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730–1805* (1998), edited by Ellis Sandoz, the two volume set, *American Political Writing during the Founding Era, 1760–1805* (1983), edited by Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, and David B. Chesebrough’s *God Ordained This War: Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830–1865* (1991), which categorizes selected sermons geographically (northern and southern) as well as by subject (e.g., slavery, sectionalism, and war). In addition, a vast number of sermons and other essays of religious perspective have been published online via academic institutions and organizations as well as the U.S. government. Many sermons, at least in edited form, were printed in newspapers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and are available through digital archives such as *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*. The databases, *Early American Imprints*, *Sabine Americana, 1500–1926*, and *HathiTrust Digital Library*, contain some of the best online collections of sermons and other material pertinent to this study. Moreover, various academic libraries now maintain digital copies of their holdings of individual sermons and other primary documents.

Traditional primary sources—private journals and correspondence—also provide valuable insights for cultural analysis of evangelical views. The second and third published volumes of *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, edited by William G. McLoughlin, have proven very helpful as a window on this Revolutionary-era Baptist’s views of civil authority and his transformation from politically disinterested evangelist to enthusiastic patriot.<sup>43</sup> Likewise,

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<sup>42</sup> Bailyn and Garrett, *Pamphlets*, vol. 1, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Backus, *Diary*, vol. 2: 1765–1785; Isaac Backus, *The Diary of Isaac Backus*, vol. 3: 1786–1806, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Providence: Brown University Press, 1979).

Charles G. Finney's *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, *Lectures on Theology*, and numerous unpublished letters and records from the archive at Oberlin College, Ohio, have yielded a fresh perspective on the evangelical political views of this most influential nineteenth-century revivalist. Other types of primary source material include church denominational records such as the minutes of the trial of the Rev. Albert Barnes before the Synod of Philadelphia (1835) and collections of correspondence by abolitionists Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké. In addition, lesser known evangelicals wrestled to interpret current events in the light of biblical teaching. Among such were Kansas pioneers John and Sarah Everett who commented on the deeds and meaning of John Brown in letters to friends and family.

Archival visits to Princeton University and Theological Seminary, the Library of Congress, and Oberlin College were extremely fruitful. Oberlin's holdings are very rich in material dealing with Charles G. Finney and with the antebellum slave debate from a Christian, primarily evangelical perspective. Princeton's archives are productive for any study in the history of American Christianity and they yielded important sources from the Colonial Era and Early Republic, but sources of nineteenth-century evangelical political significance were also rich in the smaller collection of Princeton Theological Seminary.

My research rests on mostly published or digitally available primary sources. As mentioned, information resources of the new digital landscape has made available vast quantities of primary research material in academically credible databases that were not accessible to historians even a decade ago without travel to distant physical archives. This has not made archival research unnecessary, for the process of digitization is long and expensive, requiring editorial judgment on what is and—more crucially—what is not converted to digital image. Nevertheless, for this project the discovery of unpublished primary sources was not as essential

as the careful analysis of available sources from a new perspective. As historian Mark Noll writes regarding his fine volume, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, which covers roughly the same chronology in American religious history as the current study:

Religious beliefs as expressed by the small fraction of all Americans who published, and whose works were then discussed, debated, contested, or ridiculed as part of the public record, are the focus here. Historical practice of recent decades has shown how rewarding it is to push beneath such an elite stratum in order to recover the voices of ordinary people. With full knowledge and approval of such work, I have nonetheless chosen to present my title as *America's God* rather than *Elite America's God* because of two historical convictions: that many nonpublishing citizens read, pondered, and considered themselves part of the circles of debate created by the published theology examined in this volume; and that during the years from 1730 to 1865, most residents of the United States, as well as outside, if they thought about "America" at all, did so in terms of the public realm of discourse that is the focus here.<sup>44</sup>

### **Organization and Synopsis**

This study organizes its analysis around the ideas and actions of northern evangelical Christians in response to relevant political flashpoints between 1763 and 1863. Each chapter contextualizes its emphasis on conceptions of submission to civil authority with historical background drawn from a combination of secondary and primary sources, and supports its thesis with primary materials.

Chapter one evaluates how northern evangelicals were able to justify support for the American Revolution in light of ongoing evangelical commitment to the authority of the Bible, and specifically in relation to their understanding of the command found in Romans 13:1 to "be subject unto the higher powers." I demonstrate that evangelicals who supported the Revolution did not ignore the opening command of Romans 13, but rather qualified its meaning by emphasizing the divine *purpose* of civil authority. In so doing, they came to view the Christian's responsibility to submit as conditional upon the rightful exercise of power by civil authorities.

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<sup>44</sup> Noll, *America's God*, 17-18.

Having determined that Great Britain did not exercise the power of civil authority in accordance with biblical expectations, a majority of northern evangelical colonists chose to support the Patriot cause.

In chapter two, I show that by validating the new nation's civil authority with their sanctification of republican principles and then deemphasizing their previously asserted use of verses three and four as a conditional qualifier of the initial command, northern evangelicals turned the words of Romans 13:1-7 against Americans who would test the authority of the United States to govern their lives. The combination of adjustments made by northern evangelicals to their understanding of the command to "be subject unto the higher powers" enabled them to promote peace and order almost as consistently as their former use of the passage justified what many contemporaries had called rebellion.

Chapter three assesses the rise and dominance of Jeffersonian republicanism in relation to evangelical attitudes toward governmental legitimacy in the United States. During this early national period, northern evangelicals encountered two trends that again shifted their understanding of the concept of submission to civil authority. First, their political devotion to republican principles suffered strains from the effects of the more radically republican French Revolution. Then, the election of Thomas Jefferson to the presidency, whose rationalism made him highly controversial in evangelical circles, drove a political wedge between establishment evangelicals and non-conforming evangelicals that deepened the already acrimonious ecclesiastical disputes between them. I argue that before the turn of the century evangelicals already showed signs of disenchantment with the political process because they had not sufficiently progressed toward their goal of shaping the nation's identity to be primarily defined by evangelical Protestant Christianity. Beginning about 1796 and continuing with heightened



urgency in the early decades of the nineteenth century, northern evangelicals increasingly turned to religious revival to construct a “Christian” United States as its population expanded westward.

Chapter four considers why the revivals that spread across America during the first four decades of the nineteenth century realigned the focus of northern evangelicals from political to spiritual concerns. I argue that the revivals eventually complicated the goals of evangelicals by igniting desires for cultural reform to accelerate the construction of an American identity rooted in Protestant Christianity. From the mid-1820s to the mid-1850s, increasingly aggressive political approaches to cultural reform tested the limits of evangelical submission to civil authority. In his 1839 lectures at Oberlin College in Ohio, even the politically reticent evangelist, Charles G. Finney, expressed the beginning of a theoretical foundation for civil disobedience in apparent response to the Ohio Fugitive Slave Law passed that year. At the same time, however, Finney sought to disparage any immediate insubordination to civil authority with reference to the legislation. Nevertheless, his students were growing more accustomed to preaching radical abolitionism in open defiance of governmental authority. Having sought unsuccessfully for nearly three decades to crush racial injustice in America by preaching the gospel of Christ and the cause of antislavery, northern evangelical abolitionists came to the brink of civil disobedience and even violence in opposition to slavery.

In chapter five, I explore how northern evangelical Christians engaged with the national debate over slavery and why they increasingly justified civil disobedience or violence in response to federal slave law during the final critical years of the 1850s. Evangelical abolitionist attitudes toward civil authority grew increasingly complicated during this decade. Their effort to support both submission and revolution reveals the balancing act that strained northern evangelicals in the 1850s as they found themselves increasingly at odds with the federal

government's approach to managing the tension between slavery and national unity. John Brown's raid on the government armory at Harpers Ferry and his intended slave revolt in the South marked the high point of northern evangelical resistance to federal authority regarding slavery. Despite the apparent conflict between Brown's actions and the Bible's teaching on submission to civil authority, few northern evangelicals forcefully criticized the fiery abolitionist on this ground. Instead, they weighed his motive of ending slavery and moving closer to the shared goal of a truly Christian nation against the morally questionable violence Brown employed to that end. The reason, I argue, was that higher law theory had engulfed the notion of obedience to civil authority, causing diminished attention to biblical admonitions of submission and allowing evangelical abolitionists to feel fully justified in resisting federal slave law.

Finally, in chapter six, I track the amazingly quick reversal of northern evangelicals on the issue of civil disobedience in response to southern secession. Even abolitionists who had recently advocated violent opposition to federal slave law suddenly found a voice of biblical authority to criticize the South for rebelling against civil authority and seceding from the Union. The increased attention to biblical teaching on submission to civil authority among northern evangelicals in the early 1860s can best be understood in the context of their persistent commitment to shape American identity in the image of evangelical Protestant Christianity. I argue that the combination of Lincoln's election in 1860 and the South's subsequent break with the Union permitted a dramatic shift in northern evangelical attitudes toward the federal government. From their perspective, the election of an avowed antislavery, Republican president portended the destruction of the South's social and economic system based on human bondage. To seal this conclusion, the South's rebellion had purified the nation in the view of most northern evangelicals by removing the last major obstacle to a Christian national identity: toleration of

slavery. Northern evangelicals could now wholeheartedly submit to what they once again judged to be the rightful authority of the federal government. And, they could simultaneously condemn the South for failing to “be subject unto the higher powers.”

### **Relevance of the Project**

This study of northern evangelical Christian understandings of submission to civil authority from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War sheds light on the interplay of American evangelical political theory and American democracy in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By identifying both the formative power and historical limits of New Testament teaching to mold evangelical Christian views of submission to civil authority in the context of the young American republic, the study nuances perceptions of evangelical Protestant commitment to biblical authority. In addition to clarifying the role that evangelicals played in reinforcing or undermining federal authority during this formative century, the analysis highlights the impact of cultural and intellectual forces upon evangelical Protestant biblical interpretation. Thus, it helps explain why evangelicals could be and were so involved in American politics during these 100 years, notwithstanding their insistence on the primacy of spiritual and eternal rather than political and temporal goals. My research also implies that potential insights might be gained from exploring how the notion of submission to civil authority encouraged much later evangelical Christians to reenter the political arena in the 1970s after nearly half a century of seclusion. And such analysis could inform more contemporary developments in American evangelical political engagement to predict the limits, if any, of evangelical tolerance to social, cultural or political change, as well as to suggest circumstances under which evangelical Christians might be persuaded to withdraw their commitment of submission to civil authority in the United States.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Justifying Political Rebellion: Northern Evangelicals Reject British Rule, 1763–1783**

The political context of the revolt against British rule in the American colonies began in 1763 with the end of the Seven Years War, known in North America as the French and Indian War. Though the war had strained relations between England and her North American colonies, a considerable degree of gratitude and goodwill also prevailed after years of fighting. With the war's successful conclusion, British colonists had every expectation that prosperous times lay ahead. The threat of French imperial competition in Canada had been eliminated and it was hoped that more Native American territory might open to speculators and land-hungry European settlers. However, some terms of the Treaty of Paris (February 1763), which concluded Britain's and France's dispute over North America, had offended New England Calvinists. By seemingly validating Roman Catholic "tyranny" with a promise of religious toleration in the newly acquired province of Quebec and agreeing to extend Quebec's border southward, the British Crown had not endeared itself to conservative Protestants in the northern colonies.<sup>1</sup> Then, on the heels of the Treaty of Paris, Pontiac's Rebellion (May 1763) further dampened colonial optimism that they might easily acquire Indian lands. The Royal Proclamation of the same year shattered Virginians' hopes—held since the 1740s—of making good on preliminary grants of land west of the Appalachians. Hopeful expectations in the American colonies were already proving

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Anderson, *The War that Made America: A Short History of the French and Indian War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 216; Walter R. Borneman, *The French and Indian War: Deciding the Fate of North America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 280-281; Collin G. Calloway, *The Scratch of a Pen: 1763 and the Transformation of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12-13, 114, 117-122. See also, Julie Flavell and Stephen Conway, eds., *Britain and America Go to War: The Impact of War and Warfare in Anglo-America, 1754-1815* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

unfounded.<sup>2</sup> That which many colonists perceived to be a deteriorating position within the British Empire constituted the backdrop for colonial public debate that spilled over into evangelical pulpits and publications. The underlying question of this chapter is how northern evangelical Christians who came to support the American Revolution reconciled their political convictions with the command in Romans 13:1 to “be subject unto the higher powers.”

### **Northern Evangelicals and the American Revolution**

The religious revivals of the 1730s through the 1760s—known collectively as the “Great Awakening”—spread evangelical Christianity widely if unevenly throughout the North American British colonies.<sup>3</sup> Many historians have regarded as unsatisfactory attempts, such as that of Alan Heimert, to link the ideology of the American Revolution directly to the preceding revivals. Nevertheless, elements of Heimert’s analysis were appropriated a decade or so later by historians Mark Noll and Harry Stout in their cultural studies of American religious history.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, the rhetorical and emotional style of revivalists was borrowed by Patrick Henry and other patriot luminaries to promote the cause of liberty, and recent work by Baylor University historian Thomas Kidd argues that evangelical faith influenced many patriot views.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson, *War that Made America*, 231-236, 242-250; Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 9-11, 28-38. Holton disputed the common view among historians that the Proclamation of 1763 had no serious impact on imperial relations with the colonies.

<sup>3</sup> Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 283-285; Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life, A Short History*, updated ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 112-113, 119-123; Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 267-276; Noll, *Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 91-99, 98-99. Though some historians in recent decades have questioned the wisdom of linking the revivals intellectually by grouping them together under the title, Great Awakening, I find the label both historically accurate and descriptively useful.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1966); Philip Goff, “Revivals and Revolution: Historiographic Turns since Alan Heimert’s *Religion and the American Mind*,” *Church History* 67 (December 1998): 695-721.

<sup>5</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 87-88, 94-95. For significance of the role that evangelical rhetorical style played in promoting the Revolution, see Harry S. Stout, “Religion, Communication, and the Ideological Origins of the

There are good and sufficient reasons to believe that the views of clergy and especially of evangelical clergy were of considerable import to many colonists deciding whether or not to resist British policies and, eventually, whether or not to join the fight for American independence. The Bible provided a common vocabulary among eighteenth-century provincials which was only heightened by the spread of revivals in the decades leading up to the Revolution. Historian Eran Shalev has demonstrated how political tracts in particular made use of biblical allusion and the language of the Authorized (King James) Bible in order to emphasize truth claims and gain authority and legitimacy in public debate. When such language was employed by members of the clergy in support of or opposition to political causes, it was likely to be persuasive on a population with a high degree of biblical literacy.<sup>6</sup> Northern clergymen especially took full advantage of the printed word in espousing their views. In fact, Andrew Preston, Reader in American History at Clare College, University of Cambridge, has calculated that New England clergy—evangelical and non-evangelical—were publishing four times as many pamphlets in 1776 than were secular pamphleteers.<sup>7</sup> One should also consider that because of the Great Awakening’s emphasis on a need for regenerate clergy—those who could give testimony of a conversion experience—colonists who were spiritually “awakened” by the

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American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (October 1977): 519-541. For a discussion of evangelical faith and patriot views, see Noll, *America’s God*, 191-194; Noll, *Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 115-132; Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 289.

<sup>6</sup> “It is thus fair to say that the robustness of pseudobiblicism—the mobilization of the narratives and literary arsenal of the Authorized Version’s Old Testament in public discourse—points to remarkable levels of biblical fluency in the general population (or at least among the vast and ever expanding community of early American newspaper readers); otherwise such language would have been ineffective as a mode of political communication—indeed, unintelligible altogether.” Shalev, *American Zion*, 2013), 101. See also, Shalev, “‘Written in the Style of Antiquity’: Pseudo-Biblicism and the Early American Republic, 1770-1830,” *Church History* 79 (December 2010): 800-826.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 75.

revivals would likely have respected evangelical ministers but held suspect non-evangelical ministers. Therefore, even though John Witherspoon was the only evangelical minister to sign the Declaration of Independence, the influence of evangelical clergy was felt throughout the colonies and particularly in the north prior to and during the Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

It is notoriously difficult to determine the exact percentages of colonists who supported the American Revolution as opposed to those who remained loyal to the Crown or attempted to stay neutral.<sup>9</sup> It is similarly challenging to determine with precision how many *evangelical* leaders supported revolt against Great Britain, let alone the percentage that were involved in earlier Whig resistance to imperial policies in the 1760s and 1770s. In fact, Kidd admits, “One cannot even identify a common evangelical response to the Revolution, although it appears that the majority of evangelicals from Maine to Georgia (but not in Canada) were Patriots.”<sup>10</sup> If Kidd is correct, as even a cursory examination of evangelical sermon literature from the time would suggest, then most evangelicals fell into the thirty to forty percent of American colonists who supported the revolution.

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<sup>8</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 115-130. Evangelicals were well represented among colonial and later state legislatures and as chaplains in the Continental Army.

<sup>9</sup> Well after the Revolutionary Era, John Adams reflected upon the percentage of colonial support for the patriot cause in 1775. His comments came in response to an 1813 letter from his former colleague in the Continental Congress, Thomas McKean, who had claimed more support for the cause (as early as the mid-1760s) than Adams thought had existed. Adams contended, “Upon the whole, if we allow two thirds of the people to have been with us in the revolution, is not the allowance ample? Are not two thirds of the nation now with the administration? Divided we ever have been, and ever must be. Two thirds always had and will have more difficulty to struggle with the one third than with all our foreign enemies.” John Adams to Thomas McKean, August 31, 1813 in Charles F. Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: with a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations*, vol. X (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1856), 63, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/worksofjohnadams> 10adam. Adams’ famous “rule of thirds” is based on an 1815 letter to Massachusetts Senator James Lloyd, but was intended as a reference to American support for the French Revolution. For a modern statistical analysis of loyalists and patriots during the Revolution, see Paul H. Smith, “The American Loyalists: Notes on Their Organization and Numerical Strength,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (1968): 259-277.

<sup>10</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 289.

Kidd modified Noll's categories of evangelical responses to the Revolution, labeling them patriot evangelicals, reformist evangelicals (the largest group), loyalist evangelicals (the smallest group) and sojourning evangelicals. It should be clear from the terminology that "patriot evangelicals" supported America's break from Great Britain, while "loyalist evangelicals" favored continuing submission to British civil authority. Of the four categories, therefore, only "reformist" and "sojourning" evangelicals require elaboration here. Reformist evangelicals were supportive of the Revolution primarily because they expected to achieve societal improvement as a result. In this latter part of the eighteenth century, for instance, a growing concern over the issue of slavery led to an abortive attempt to eliminate the institution with the founding of a new republic.<sup>11</sup> The goal of societal transformation would later cause northern evangelicals to play a crucial role in American politics during the three decades before the Civil War (1861-1865), but the notion also contributed to an inclination for many to cast in their lot with the patriot cause. Sojourning evangelicals represented a minority of evangelicals, most with roots among the Anabaptists of sixteenth-century Europe, and were so-called by Kidd because they emphasized their principal citizenship in God's kingdom. They distanced themselves socially as "sojourners" in their earthly country and desired to remain neutral in the dispute between the colonists and Great Britain. Kidd went on to clarify that "though a seeming majority of evangelicals supported the Patriot side, many other evangelicals remained loyal to Britain or tried to stay neutral." And, he concluded, ironically, "If anything, the more radical or socially marginalized evangelicals

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<sup>11</sup> James Madison exemplified the conflicted feelings some of the founders held regarding slavery. He wrote to his father in 1783 regarding a slave who had traveled with him to Philadelphia, indicating that Madison could not send the slave again to Virginia, but had found a means through indentured service to lead him toward freedom in the North. "I do not expect to get near the worth of him;" he explained, "but cannot think of punishing him by transportation [to Virginia] merely for coveting that liberty for which we have paid the price of so much blood, and have proclaimed so often to be the right, & worthy the pursuit, of every human being." James Madison to James Madison Sr., September 8, 1783, in Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The Writings of James Madison* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900-1910), Library of Congress, [http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mjm.02\\_0069\\_0070](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mjm.02_0069_0070).



seem often to have leaned toward neutrality or Loyalism, while moderate evangelicals [the majority] tended toward Patriotism, or at least reformism.”<sup>12</sup> The significance of this conclusion is not that evangelicals supported the Revolution less than other colonists—for northern evangelicals at least, the opposite is true—but that they made the decision for varying reasons and were often guided by their understanding of biblical teaching.

This chapter reevaluates how northern evangelicals were able to justify support for the American Revolution in light of ongoing evangelical commitment to the authority of the Bible and specifically in relation to their understanding of the command found in Romans 13:1 to “be subject unto the higher powers.” For British colonists in North America, the “higher powers” would presumably have included those in England, at least until 1776. Eighteenth-century evangelicals would have been keenly aware of this portion of the New Testament because many, especially those in close proximity to New England, were strongly influenced by Puritan divines of the previous century. According to Ellis Sandoz, Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Louisiana State University, this affinity for Puritan writings among evangelical preachers contributed to a heavy emphasis on the New Testament book of Romans. He observes that the form of Puritan sermons followed guidelines set out by William Perkins in a 1592 work entitled *Arte of Prophesying*. Sandoz writes, “The key to finding the unity of the Bible, according to William Perkins, was to begin by first mastering Paul’s Letter to the Romans; then, and only then, ought the student move to the remainder of the New Testament and subsequently to the Old Testament.”<sup>13</sup> Sandoz found in this sequence of sermon preparation an explanation for

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<sup>12</sup> “Beside those already mentioned, other minority evangelical groups—German Pietists, Mennonites, Moravians, and Shakers among them—all inclined toward neutrality.” Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 307 cf. 291.

<sup>13</sup> Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), xix.

evangelical preoccupation with the doctrines of salvation and sanctification. But, it would also guarantee an early familiarity among northern evangelicals with the teaching of submission to civil authority in Romans. Nevertheless, despite the imperative in Romans 13:1 to submit to civil authorities, a majority of northern evangelicals came to support the American Revolution.

I argue that evangelicals who supported the Revolution did not ignore Romans 13:1, but rather qualified its meaning by emphasizing the duties of civil rulers addressed in verses three and four:

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.<sup>14</sup>

By emphasizing the divine *purpose* of civil authority, most northern evangelicals during the late colonial and revolutionary periods came to view the Christian's responsibility to submit as conditional upon the rightful exercise of power by civil authorities. Moreover, they were assisted in qualifying the initial command of Romans 13 by a sophisticated combination of liberal political philosophy and classical republican ideology, both popular in Britain's American colonies at the time.

### **Biblical Authority and the Meaning of Submission in a Revolutionary Age**

In their study of the how the Bible was used in public debate throughout American history, Noll and Nathan Hatch, co-founders of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College, identified a crucial problem for analysis:

The problem appears most clearly in sermons preached at times of great national crises, where even the most superficial sampling leads to a troubling question. Did ministers, preaching from the Bible as public spokesmen, really use Scripture as a primary source

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<sup>14</sup> For the complete English text of Romans 13:1-7, see Introduction, 1.

for the convictions they expressed? Or did they in fact merely exploit Scripture to sanctify convictions—whether nationalistic, political, social, or racial—which had little to do with biblical themes?<sup>15</sup>

The evidence for how evangelicals understood Romans 13 during the Revolutionary Era, examined below, shows that ministers did not “merely exploit” this text against its internal theme. Rather, motivated by a growing conviction that the American colonies were chosen by God for special purposes—the fulfillment of which British “tyranny” endangered—many northern evangelicals grappled with the meaning of submission to civil authority for their political circumstances.<sup>16</sup> Applying contemporary political theories, they reassessed the command to “be subject unto the higher powers” and validated Locke’s right of revolution within the scope of Romans 13:1-7.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in pursuit of an America whose greatness as a republic would be defined primarily by its status as a Christian nation, they came to understand the imperative to “be subject unto the higher powers” as compatible with revolt against British authority.

Indeed, mid-eighteenth-century clergymen were often remarkably attuned to political ideology. Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, editors of an excellent two-volume collection of political writings in early American history, conclude that “Locke’s work had considerable impact on Americans by the middle of the eighteenth century, probably because it nicely

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<sup>15</sup> Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 41.

<sup>16</sup> Describing the influence of covenant theology on New England views of political order, Stout asserts with insight: “Within this historical covenant perspective, resistance to England was only secondarily about constitutional rights and political liberties. Ultimately, resistance became necessary the minute England declared the colonies’ duty of ‘unlimited submission’ in ‘all cases whatsoever’ and, in so doing, set itself alongside God’s Word as a competing sovereign. Such demands were ‘tyrannical’ and left New Englanders no choice but to resist unto death or forfeit their identity as a covenant people.” Stout, *New England Soul*, 7. Stout’s comments refer specifically to Puritan-Congregational views, but the concept of “chosen-ness” will be shown to be influential to the understanding of Romans 13 among a wider circle of northern evangelicals.

<sup>17</sup> John Locke, “Essay Concerning the True Original Extent and End of Civil Government; Second Treatise of Government,” ed. C.B. Macpherson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980), vii, xx, xxi.

justified theoretically what Americans were already doing.”<sup>18</sup> Shalev concurs, but emphasizes the role of civic humanism in shaping colonial and early American thinking.<sup>19</sup> Both works emphasize the agility with which northern clergy blended contemporary political theory and the Bible. “Hence,” Shalev rightly asserts, “the representation of Meroz’s betrayal [in not coming to the aid of Israelite Judges Deborah and Barak] and the subsequent revilement it received in civic humanist colors reveals a republican exegetical mode through which Americans read and applied the republican Bible to their revolutionary needs.”<sup>20</sup> The propensity of theologically liberal clergy to blend enlightened political theory and the Bible has been well documented. Hyneman and Lutz, for example, drew the above conclusion in an introduction to liberal Congregational Pastor John Tucker’s 1771 election sermon in Newbury, Massachusetts. Likewise, Massachusetts Congregational minister Abraham Williams’ 1762 Election Day sermon reads like a Lockean primer for United States founding documents—especially the Declaration of Independence—only set in the framework of the New Testament’s teaching on civil authority. Williams employed Romans 13 to explain his understanding of the divine purpose of civil authority, declaring that “The End of their Institution, is to be Instruments of Divine Providence, to secure and promote the Happiness of Society; *to be Terrors to the Doers of Evil*,—to prevent and punish Unrighteousness . . . and *to be a Praise*, a Security and Reward *to them that do well*,

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<sup>18</sup> Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, eds. *American Political Writing during the Founding Era, 1760–1805*, vol. 1 (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983), 158.

<sup>19</sup> “The ties binding the Bible and America, the Old and the New Israel, were intensified through civic humanism, an ideology forged in the tyranny-hating, duty-bound Roman republic.” Shalev, *American Zion*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Shalev, *American Zion*, 36. See also, Baldwin, *The New England Clergy*, 7, 12; Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 334. The curse of Meroz (from Judges 5:23) was among the most widely cited in pro-patriot sermons of the Revolutionary Era.

(Rom. 13. ch.).”<sup>21</sup> He conveyed a knowledgeable approval of Lockean liberalism throughout, not only in concepts like “the Happiness of Society,” which would later be notably expressed in Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration of Independence, but in his understanding of individual civil rights, natural law, and popular sovereignty.<sup>22</sup>

It has not been as clearly demonstrated that evangelical ministers were also prone to make use of contemporary political theories. Notwithstanding their predilection for gospel conversions, preaching by evangelical ministers could at times be permeated with the rhetoric of either Lockean or classical republican political convictions. Concisely for the purpose of this essay, Lockean liberalism and classical republican ideology (civic humanism) can be distinguished by their origins, orientation, and conception of citizenship. Eighteenth-century liberalism had its origins in the enlightened political theories of *philosophes* such as John Locke (1632-1704) and Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755). Civic humanism, on the other hand, hearkened back to classical and neo-classical authors. Lockean liberalism oriented political philosophy in relation to individualistic, enlightened self-interest whereas classical republican ideology stressed community and virtue as the proper orientation for good government and a stable society. While Lockean liberalism viewed citizenship in passive terms, emphasizing the protection of individual rights, civic humanism conceived of citizenship actively, emphasizing participation in civic duties.<sup>23</sup> By examining sermons published as pamphlets by northern evangelicals in light of American political developments during the late-eighteenth century, one can observe that these ministers were keenly aware of contemporary

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<sup>21</sup> Hyneman and Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing*, vol. 1, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 14-16.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Enlarged ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967, 1992), 351-352.

political theories. Indeed, the evidence suggests that such theories were often used as a filter through which ministers passed the New Testament command to submit to civil authority as they interpreted it for their congregations. Occasionally, though less often than was the case with theologically liberal/rationalist ministers, specific ideology was incorporated directly into evangelical sermons.

Election Day sermons offered a traditional venue, especially in New England, for ministers to bring scriptural admonition to bear on the political life of North American colonists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their significance diminished somewhat in the early national period, but continued in New England throughout much of the nineteenth century. Occasional sermons such as those given around elections were not the only time that the clergy addressed political topics, but they are common sources of religiously guided political views. And they could be quite timely from a political perspective, notwithstanding the fact that they became routine in many of the northern colonies.

Delivered less than three months after the conclusion of the French and Indian War and on the cusp of renewed hostilities by Native American peoples remembered commonly as Pontiac's Rebellion, Reverend Stephen White (1718-1794) was invited to preach before the General Assembly of Connecticut in honor of the anniversary of that body's first election on May 12, 1763. Revivals of the previous two decades had resulted in a substantial number of awakened congregations pastored by New Light clergymen such as White. The subject of his message was "Civil Rulers, God's by Office," and he used the opportunity both to commend and to challenge his listeners regarding the scope of their authority over the public. At first, without directly appealing to Romans 13:1, White appeared to support an absolute view of what it meant to "be subject unto the higher powers": that Christians are commanded to submit under whatever

governmental authority they live in all circumstances except those explicitly contrary to other commands of God in Scripture. This view would require civil obedience qualified only according to the strictest readings of related Scriptures such as Acts 5:29 (“obey God rather than men”) and Matthew 22:21 (“[render] unto God the things that are God’s”). He opined that God had permitted considerable latitude in humankind’s choice of various forms of government, but that regardless of the form, “Obedience [was] due . . . to those who administer the same, for God’s sake, where nothing is exacted that clashes with a higher Law, [or] the supreme Authority of God over the Souls and Consciences of Men.”<sup>24</sup> His interpretation seemed to allow little room for disobeying—let alone deposing—“Christian” rulers, such as those in England or in the colonies, except under the most extreme and rare cases.

Midway through his sermon, White referred directly to the language of Romans 13 and seemed once again to favor an absolute view of the command to “be subject unto the higher powers.” He stressed the appointment magistrates enjoy as “Vicereagents” of God and that “God has expressly Required that Honor & Obedience be given to them.” But, he suddenly shifted his attention to the responsibility of rulers to accomplish “the Good of the Body Politick” and insisted that “People have their Rights, as well as Rulers, and when these are infringed upon, and the Power of the Magistrate is abused to Oppression and Tyranny, the People for whose good they are invested with their Power and Authority, are no longer bound to submit to them.”<sup>25</sup> With this statement, White unexpectedly declared the initial command of the passage to be qualified,

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<sup>24</sup> Stephen White, *Civil Rulers Gods by Office, and the duties of such considered and enforced* (New London: Timothy Green, 1763), 6-7, Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 9538, [http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAI&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=0F301AC89B475A48&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAI&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F301AC89B475A48&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed March 6, 2011). I have retained original spelling and punctuation in all quotations, but have updated printing styles of the eighteenth-century to improve readability.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

notwithstanding his previous bravado in trumpeting the extent of obedience required toward those who stand in the place of God and execute civil authority. Without directly appealing to Locke, White expounded an understanding of the text that assumed Locke's theories of popular sovereignty (rulers rule only with the consent of the people) and the right of revolution (rulers who do not seek the common good can be properly deposed).<sup>26</sup> Using terminology frequently employed by opponents of an absolute view of the command to be in subjection, he disdained "the doctrines of Passive [i.e., absolute] Obedience, and Non-Resistance" as having been "long exploded as absurd Principles."<sup>27</sup> His pivot was set up by a seemingly casual allusion to God's purpose for civil authority as expressed in Romans 13:4 ("for he is the minister of God to thee for good"). One wonders if the original hearers of the sermon—among whom were the elected members of the General Assembly of Connecticut—recoiled at the abrupt reversal in White's message, but the fact that he was invited to publish his remarks suggests that his audience found little in them offensive. White's sermon merely pointed out the extent to which Lockean liberalism had become accepted in the northern colonies by the 1760s, and the degree to which evangelicals had absorbed his principles and adapted biblical interpretation to fit them.<sup>28</sup> In any case, the reverend's message could not be construed as a real threat to the newly elected assembly, for he went on to bless the current magistrates for upholding God's design for civil authority. Nor did he indicate on what objective basis "the people" might be expected to assess

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<sup>26</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, Book II, Chapter XIX (London: R. Butler, 1821), 212-220, 221-243, Bartleby.com, Great Books Online, <http://www.bartleby.com/br/169.html> (accessed February 16, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> White, "Civil Rulers," 22.

<sup>28</sup> My analysis concurs with Stout's related observation: "Following war with France rationalist and evangelical ministers discovered anew the need to come together against common enemies in pursuit of a common cause. This time the common enemy was 'tyranny,' embodied in corrupt English officials, and the common cause was 'liberty.' After 1763, these two themes resounded in every settlement on an increasing variety of weekday occasions and eventually led to the conclusion that rebellion against the mother country was God-ordained." Stout, *New England Soul*, 259. See also, Baldwin, *The New England Clergy*, 22-23.



whether their rulers served for good or for evil. White's understanding of the command to "be subject unto the higher powers" sought to extoll "unlimited Subjection to Civil Rulers," yet hold civil rulers to scrutiny by their subjects. The tension thus created went unresolved by the author, who could argue that the righteous character of the present colonial magistrates left moot the question of whether Christian people might resist their authority.<sup>29</sup>

Just two years after the conclusion of the French and Indian War, British American colonists and their metropole again faced political conflict, this time over Britain's controversial effort to replenish imperial coffers that had been seriously drained in a war that many in the British Parliament held to be chiefly in the interests of their American colonists.<sup>30</sup> Stephen Johnson's 1765 fast day sermon during the Stamp Act Crisis not only assumed Lockean political philosophy in qualifying the meaning of Romans 13:1 as White had, but explicitly referenced the language of that philosophy. The Stamp Act, enacted earlier that year, was a tax directed specifically at the American colonies on paper and a wide range of printed documents from marriage licenses to newspapers. To indicate compliance with the required duty, a royal stamp was affixed to each item. Parliament introduced the measure at the recommendation of the Crown to help repay heavy debts accumulated during the French and Indian War from those who had benefited most directly from its successful prosecution. The tax led many colonists to question whether George III still had benevolent intentions for his subjects in North America.

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<sup>29</sup> White, "Civil Rulers," 26.

<sup>30</sup> John L. Bullion, "British Ministers and American Resistance to the Stamp Act, October-December 1765," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 49 no. 1 (January 1992): 89-107, DOI: 10.2307/2947336 (accessed June 5, 2014); Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis, Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953). This work remains an excellent, if dated, source on the significance of the Stamp Act in driving a wedge between Great Britain and its North American colonies.

Calls by colonial assemblies for days of fasting and prayer provide a measure of the perceived hardship incurred by the Stamp Act.<sup>31</sup>

Johnson was another New Light Congregational minister in Connecticut. In language that would be employed by patriots throughout the decade leading up to the Declaration of Independence, Johnson declared the provisions of the Stamp Act to “threaten (in our apprehension) no less than slavery and ruin to this great people, in this widely extended continent.”<sup>32</sup> The principle text of the message was taken from the *Acts of the Apostles* in the New Testament, but based on the account of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt as recorded in the Old Testament.<sup>33</sup> Johnson made use of the biblical record about Israel’s bondage in Egypt and subsequent deliverance to evaluate the enslaving potential of British policy toward the North American colonies. But, his comments were laden with more than Scripture. He also made ready use of Lockean rhetoric. He feared the loss of religious as well as civil liberty that might result from British policy, “because by arbitrary power, the hedge of all legal securities, which we have in a free constitution, (as to life, liberty, religion, and property, and even of the Protestant succession) is broken down, and effectually taken away . . . and consequently, after the entrance of these monsters [arbitrary power and slavery], there remains no solid foundation for any further

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<sup>31</sup> Dirk Hoerder, “Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765-1776,” in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 241-246. Young’s collection of essays offers interpretive insights on the Revolution from the perspective of New Left historians.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Johnson, *Some Important Observations, occasioned by, and adapted to, the publick fast* (Newport, RI: Samuel Hall, 1766), 3, Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 10434, [http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAI&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=0F3015210DCED9E0&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAI&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F3015210DCED9E0&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed April 13, 2011). For evidence of Johnson’s evangelical convictions see his book published first in New London in 1786, Stephen Johnson, *The Everlasting punishment of the ungodly, illustrated and evinced to be a Scripture doctrine: and the salvation of all men, as taught in several late publications, confuted...* (Farmington Hills: Gale ECCO, 2010). Regarding colonial rhetoric of “slavery” and an argument that such fears were sincere, see Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 119-120, 232-235.

<sup>33</sup> Acts 7:30-36.

security and confidence.” Such arbitrary power as England exhibited in the Stamp Act was, to Johnson, “an outlet to all good and happiness; and an inlet to all vice and misery.”<sup>34</sup> Throughout his sermon, Johnson continued to appeal to the “law of nature” and “natural law.” The references to Locke’s natural rights of life, liberty and property could hardly be more obvious. Moreover, his warning that an ensuing loss of human “happiness” would be the inevitable result of arbitrary civil authority suggests a prescient anticipation of Thomas Jefferson’s sampling of Lockean “unalienable Rights” in the Declaration of Independence.<sup>35</sup>

Still, the fact that Johnson was familiar or even enamored with Lockean political theory would not prove in itself that Locke’s principles shaped his understanding of Romans 13 and submission to civil authority. Later in the sermon, however, Johnson made the connection indisputable. He professed that biblical injunctions to “Honour the king” and “render unto Caesar” were “highly Christian” and worthy to maintain, but such submission ought to depend on whether or not civil magistrates execute their offices and duties within rightful boundaries and for appropriate purposes. The conception of natural rights was Johnson’s interpretive key to prevent an absolute understanding of Christian duty to obey civil authorities. He prefaced his interpretive comments with ruminations on readings from political sources:

The best writers upon government, tell us, that when the authority of a free government invade the liberties of the people and endeavour arbitrarily to take away their properties, and reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power; that such slavish endeavours dissolve the government, and the subjects obligation of obedience;---yea, constitutes a state of war with the people, in which the latter may reassume their natural rights, and defend themselves with all the power which God has given them; and that they may use this

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<sup>34</sup> Johnson, *Some Important Observations*, 8-9. For more general appeals to “the law of nature” and “natural law,” see *Ibid.*, 10, 22.

<sup>35</sup> The final draft of the Declaration of Independence reads, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

power in a way of prevention, before actually reduced to bondage.<sup>36</sup>

With Locke's principles of natural law as a framework for analysis, Johnson turned directly to Romans 13:1-2 and asked whether these verses demanded absolute obedience to civil authorities. His answer was a resounding, "No, the text means quite another thing. . . ." Johnson concluded that the command for Christians to "be subject unto the higher powers" was qualified by an implied prerequisite in verse four: "for he is the minister of God to thee for good." Rightful civil authority, according to Johnson, must serve "the good of the subject and community."<sup>37</sup> He understood the biblical statement of civil authority's purpose as a condition that permitted civil disobedience in circumstances other than those explicitly spelled out elsewhere in Scripture. No obedience was owed—even to duly constituted authorities—if, according to Locke's theory of government, their demands were judged to be arbitrary or unjustly detrimental either to individuals or the public at large. Johnson did not make clear who the final arbiters of "unconstitutional" authority would be, especially if various subjects disagreed on the legitimacy of government edicts. There can be no doubt but that Lockean liberal political theory encouraged Johnson to come to this particular qualified understanding of Romans 13, and at a remarkably early stage in the colonists' dispute with Great Britain.<sup>38</sup>

In the context of the Stamp Act Crisis, it is also important to note the conspicuous lack of references to Romans 13:7 in northern evangelical publications during the dispute with England ("Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom").

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<sup>36</sup> Johnson, *Some Important Observations*, 23. Johnson footnoted his comments here as based upon "Locke on government: P. 154, 230, 237, 238, 243, 289, 290."

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. Johnson or the printer inaccurately attributed his quote of Romans 13:4 to "verse 16," when the chapter contains only fourteen verses.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 25.

Their commitment to the authority of scripture and a reasonable anticipation that they would incur challenges from royal authorities who were no doubt also familiar with the text should have led evangelical opponents of the Stamp Act to preemptively address this characteristic of submission to the “higher powers” and justify their opposition to the British measure. The virtual absence from evangelical public discourse at the time of any reference to the portion of the text that directly addresses taxes constitutes an irony of hermeneutical efforts to elevate Romans 13:3-4 to the status of a conditional clause justifying limits on civil authority. There seemed to be no similar impetus to contextualize the last verse of the biblical paragraph, even during a conflict that ostensibly began as a debate over tax policy.

Once the colonies declared their independence in 1776, northern evangelicals tended to express their support for the patriot cause in even more direct terms, stressing the justness of the colonies’ revolt and joining other voices that called for perseverance in the face of hard service for the sake of liberty. The difficulty of the task before them was clear to the signers of the Declaration of Independence. They made more than a show of dependence up the assistance of heaven, “appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of [their] intentions,” and pledged to one another their “Lives . . . Fortunes . . . and [their] sacred Honor.” It became quickly and painfully apparent that they had not misjudged the trial ahead. The year 1777 was a difficult one for General George Washington, whose soldiers fought with mixed results at best against the British. Mobilization efforts were successful in Massachusetts, but weak in other colonies and pathetic in Virginia. American forces suffered a devastating defeat at Fort Ticonderoga, New York, retreating in disarray and on the verge of collapse. Smallpox continued to plague the Continental Army and militias to a far greater extent than it did the British Army, but Washington’s decision on February 5 to order a general inoculation would soon begin to turn

the tide of the disease. The Americans fought a successful campaign against a force under the command of British General John Burgoyne, but suffered heavy casualties before Burgoyne finally agreed to a conditional surrender at Saratoga, New York on October 17. December found Washington and his poorly clad troops struggling to hold on against the ravages of brutal winter weather and meager provisions at Valley Forge in Pennsylvania.<sup>39</sup>

In that year, on the first anniversary of the publication of the Declaration of Independence, Massachusetts evangelical Congregationalist Peter Whitney (b.1744) published a sermon with the unambiguous title, “American Independence Vindicated.”<sup>40</sup> Whitney’s obvious support for American independence should by no means be taken for granted. Certainly his father, minister of the Congregational church in Petersham, Massachusetts, was no revolutionary patriot. John C. Crane, the author of an 1889 article on Peter Whitney, quoted a contemporary source on the political dynamics in his father’s congregation that culminated in the minister’s dismissal at the end of 1774: “Against Rev. Mr. [Aaron] Whitney, who had continued, both in his preaching and his praying, to inculcate submission to the sovereign, the tide of popular indignation rose at length to a high pitch.” Having been voted out of his pulpit by the congregation, the elder Whitney refused to stop preaching until a committee of townsmen organized an armed guard and turned him away from the meeting-house door on May 24, 1775.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Walter Sargent, “The Massachusetts Rank and File of 1777,” in *War and Society in the American Revolution: Mobilization and Home Fronts*, ed. John Resch and Walter Sargent (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 48-52; Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-1782* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 62, 87, 93-94.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Whitney, *American Independence Vindicated* (Boston: E. Draper, 1777), Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 15710, [http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.882004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=0F301A988A59F6A0&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.882004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F301A988A59F6A0&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed March 11, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> John C. Crane, *Peter Whitney and His History of Worcester County*, Reprinted from the Proceedings of The Worcester Society of Antiquity for 1888 (Worcester: Franklin P. Rice, 1889), HathiTrust Digital Library,

The younger Whitney graduated from Harvard in 1762, studied theology in preparation for ordination and accepted a pastorate in the church of Northborough, Massachusetts, in 1767 where he remained until his death in 1816.<sup>42</sup> He was marked as an evangelical Congregationalist in both his preaching and in the part he played as a member of the delegation from the Marlborough Association of ministers in the formation of The Evangelical Missionary Society in Massachusetts in 1807.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, he was an advocate of the cause of American Independence.

Whitney's pro-revolutionary sermon had actually been preached on September 12, 1776 to celebrate the publishing of the Declaration of Independence. Like Stephen White and Stephen Johnson, Whitney would address the command to "be subject to higher powers," but he would do so more subtly and conclude with a unique perspective on the right of American colonies to throw off their British oppressors. Whitney's main text was taken from the Old Testament book of First Kings in which was recorded the division of the Israelite kingdom after King Solomon's death. In an apparent attempt to validate his authority, Solomon's son, Rehoboam, unwisely threatened tyrannical rule. The ten northern tribes of Israel revolted and formed an independent kingdom, beginning a period of civil war. Adroitly connecting the lesson of tyranny and rebellion in Israel to the contemporary rift between Great Britain and the North American

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Record 009598981, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t30290z84;view=1up;seq=11> (accessed April 22, 2014), 9-10.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 11, 19; "The Address and Constitution of the Evangelical Missionary Society" (Cambridge: William Hilliard, 1807), 4, Early American Imprints, Series 2, no. 12520, [http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Evans?p\\_action=doc&p\\_theme=eai&p\\_topdoc=1&p\\_docnum=1&p\\_sort=YMD\\_date:D&p\\_product=SHAW&p\\_text\\_direct-0=u433=%28%2012520%20%29u433ad=%28%2012520%20%29&p\\_nbid=V6AI57XSMTM5ODI5MTU1OS4xMDYwMjY6MToxNDoxMjkuMTMwLjE5MS45Nw&p\\_docref=](http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Evans?p_action=doc&p_theme=eai&p_topdoc=1&p_docnum=1&p_sort=YMD_date:D&p_product=SHAW&p_text_direct-0=u433=%28%2012520%20%29u433ad=%28%2012520%20%29&p_nbid=V6AI57XSMTM5ODI5MTU1OS4xMDYwMjY6MToxNDoxMjkuMTMwLjE5MS45Nw&p_docref=) (accessed April 23, 2014); "Constitution of the Evangelical Missionary Society in Massachusetts" (Worcester: William Manning, 1818), 3, Early American Imprints, Series 2, no. 43974, [http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Evans/?p\\_product=EAIX&p\\_theme=eai&p\\_nbid=B63J50ILMTM5ODI5MDI4Mi41MTgzMToxOjE0OjEyOS4xMzAuMTkxLjk3&p\\_action=doc&p\\_queryname=1&p\\_docref=v2:0F2B1FCB879B099B@EAIX-104405B8550D9660@43974-115B5F17A5012500@1](http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Evans/?p_product=EAIX&p_theme=eai&p_nbid=B63J50ILMTM5ODI5MDI4Mi41MTgzMToxOjE0OjEyOS4xMzAuMTkxLjk3&p_action=doc&p_queryname=1&p_docref=v2:0F2B1FCB879B099B@EAIX-104405B8550D9660@43974-115B5F17A5012500@1) (accessed April 23, 2014).

colonies, Whitney found an explanation that corresponded to the teaching of Romans 13. He told his listeners that they “need not wonder that the ten tribes of Israel fell off from the house of David, if the house of David fall away from the great end of their advancement to rule and authority which was ‘to be ministers of God, for good to the people.’”<sup>44</sup> As in previous examples, Whitney appealed to verse four to qualify the necessity of compliance with the imperative of verse one.

To this now familiar strain, the minister added a brief survey of historical abuses of power exercised by the monarchy against the colonies. Beginning with “useless and oppressive restrictions” of commerce suffered by the colonies under the Stuarts in the seventeenth century and continuing through “grievous, oppressive and intolerable” actions by the crown in recent decades, Whitney trotted out a litany of alleged provocations by Great Britain. In all previous circumstances, claimed the minister—apparently without sarcasm—the colonies had “submitted without complaint” or at the least with “no oppugnation of government.”<sup>45</sup> But despite numerous petitions, the colonies “could get no relief: if we had [therefore] submitted to their usurped jurisdiction, we must have been in a state of the most abject slavery and wretchedness; and because we *could* not submit, we are threatened to be devoured with the sword.”<sup>46</sup> Here was Whitney’s unique contribution to qualifying the command to “be subject unto the higher powers.” He argued that an absolute reading of Romans 13:1 was impossible to fulfill, the colonies *could* not have remained in the Empire if they had desired to do so, for Great Britain had driven them away. Although novel on one level, Whitney’s argument of no culpability on

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<sup>44</sup> Whitney, *American Independence Vindicated*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 23.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 29. Emphasis in original.



the basis of restricted moral agency was still a byproduct of Lockean and republican political theory applied to the biblical text. It was premised on the virtuous responsibility of free people to resist tyranny (civic humanism) and on the conviction that natural rights obligated governments to fulfill its duty, however vaguely defined, or else the people would be freed from obligatory submission (Lockean liberalism). Whitney reasoned that “When such a long train of abuses . . . design to reduce us under absolute despotism, it is our right, it is our duty to throw off such government, and provide new guards for our future security.”<sup>47</sup> This statement echoed the sentiments of the Declaration of Independence, in honor of which Whitney’s sermon was given. His evangelical respect for New Testament authority led Whitney to address the command of Romans 13:1 directly and to give textual reasons justifying its qualified application, yet Whitney regularly turned to the language of Locke and classical republicanism for support of the North American colonies’ revolt against England. On the basis of these justifications, Whitney had come to believe that colonists—including evangelical colonists—were not only permitted to rebel, but compelled to do so.

It would have come as no surprise to Charles Woodmason that evangelical leaders had come under the sway of Lockean ideas. This Anglo-Catholic Church of England minister in the Carolinas was a convinced loyalist and even more critical of evangelical social impropriety—upsetting societal and ecclesiastical hierarchies—than he was skeptical of evangelical theology. Since the revivals of the Great Awakening, Woodmason had bristled at the inroads being made among North Carolina’s backcountry settlers by evangelical missionaries whom he believed were “instilling democratical and commonwealth principles into their minds—embittering them

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 30.

against the very name of bishops, and all episcopal government.”<sup>48</sup> He even imagined that revivalists were planting seeds of rebellion as early as the mid-1760s. This last assertion was probably a product of Woodmason’s later reflections in light of the drive for independence, but his perception that revival preaching caused colonists to question established authority was no illusion. Though a full exploration of the phenomenon remains outside the scope of the present study, his vexation at northern evangelical missionaries and their “democratical” ideas also points to the probable influence of republican-oriented northern evangelicals well beyond the borders of New England.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, after the War for Independence began, times became sufficiently calamitous as to jolt many evangelical ministers from their standard homiletical practice focused on exhortation and evangelism and redirect them toward presentist interpretations of the biblical text. Describing the wartime preaching of Jonathan Edwards, Jr. (the luminary’s son), historian Donald Weber explains that his “revolutionary sermons reveal an Edwardsian minister *immersed* in the times, obsessed (as were all Protestant clergymen) by the events and crises of politics and history.” Weber observed that the younger Edwards’ sermons proffered evidence of a man distracted from his typical pastoral concerns of converting the lost and edifying the saved, “as if the history being enacted had shaken Edwards loose from the atemporal sequence of expounding the morphology of conversion into a world of politics, military maneuvers, and libertarian

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<sup>48</sup> Richard J. Hooker, ed., *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 240-241; Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 65.

<sup>49</sup> Baptists, who would later dominate religious life in the Carolinas, arrived somewhat on the coattails of other pioneering evangelical revivalists but were already threatening Woodmason’s Anglican efforts by the late 1750s. According to McLoughlin, “In Sandy Creek, N.C., in 1755 [Shubal] Stearns [1702-1771] and his brother-in-law, Daniel Marshall, established the first Separate Baptist church in the South, consisting largely at first of immigrants from Connecticut. Stearns also formed the Sandy Creek Association, the first Baptist association in North Carolina.” Backus, *Diary*, vol. 3, 1248 n. 4.

discourse, which in effect determined the biblical text to be applied to the bewildering whirl of history itself.”<sup>50</sup> The dramatic events of the times no doubt seemed to fit well with the dynamic biblical preaching that had become common fare among evangelicals since George Whitefield brought his theater-like preaching style to the colonies in service of the gospel during the Great Awakening.<sup>51</sup>

Still, not all evangelical Christians supported the Revolution—especially in the southern colonies—and some opposed the war on the basis of the command to “be subject unto the higher powers.” These questioned whether an abrogation of government responsibility should even trigger resistance by the governed, preferring instead to leave civil authorities accountable to the Governor of the Universe. John Joachim Zubly of Savannah (1724-1781) was an evangelical Presbyterian minister who represented Georgia at the Second Continental Congress in 1775. He eventually withdrew from that body, however, and spoke out as a loyalist against armed revolt. “What may justify a war against a different nation,” he argued, “may not even be a plausible pretence for taking up arms against our own sovereign, or any part of the state of which insurgents have hitherto been members.” Zubly then quoted Romans 13:2, “Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.” He warned colonists who disregarded Romans 13:2 that armed revolt “like some powerful and violent medicines, ought to be handled with the utmost caution, lest it becomes a dangerous weapon in the hands of a madman, and by an untimely or over-dose

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<sup>50</sup> Donald Weber, “The Recovery of Jonathan Edwards,” in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 55-56.

<sup>51</sup> Frank Lambert, “‘Peddler in Divinity’: George Whitefield and the Great Awakening, 1737–1745,” in Stanley N. Katz et al., eds., *Colonial America: Essays in Politics and Social Development*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 511-529.

destroy that very constitution which it ought to preserve.”<sup>52</sup> Kidd captures the essence of Zubly’s conviction, “Political and economic resistance Zubly could accept and even promote, but at bloody rebellion he drew a line that could almost never be crossed.”<sup>53</sup> As a result of a highly suspect judicial proceeding in 1777, Zubly was banished from Georgia and suffered the loss of half his estate because he refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the newly independent state. Zubly contended with credible evidence that the process made a mockery of the rule of law and threatened the very constitutional liberties for which Georgia now claimed to fight. He was banished despite his offer to swear that he “Would give no Intelligence to, nor take up Arms in Aid to the [t]roops of the King of Great-Britain. And that [he] had received no Letters of Protection since the War.”<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, most evangelical Christians did support the war, and many of these sensed the need to reconcile their revolt against British authority with the teaching of Romans 13, whether or not they were confronted by the determined objections of fellow evangelicals like Zubly. In the critical years between the end of the French and Indian War and the signing of the 1783 Treaty of Paris, northern evangelical clergymen who supported the Revolution and addressed Romans 13 consistently utilized the two approaches displayed above to justify

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<sup>52</sup> John J. Zubly, “Helvetius,” *Royal Georgia Gazette* 75 (August 3, 1780) in Randall M. Miller, ed., “A Warm & Zealous Spirit”: *John J. Zubly and the American Revolution, A Selection of His Writings* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1982), 178-179.

<sup>53</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 303; See also John J. Zubly, *The law of liberty, A Sermon on American Affairs, preached At the Opening of the Provincial Congress of Georgia. Addressed to the right honourable The Earl of Dartmouth, With an appendix, giving a concise Account of the struggles of Swisserland to recover their Liberty* (Philadelphia: Henry Miller, 1775), Eighteenth Century Collections, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T001&docId=CB130904597&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> (accessed June 3, 2014).

<sup>54</sup> John J. Zubly, *To the Grand Jury of the County of Chatham, state of Georgia* (Savannah: William Lancaster and Dr. Zubly, 1777), 2, Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 15715, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=0F30145D4700C920&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F30145D4700C920&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed June 3, 2014).

resistance and eventual revolt against English rule. They qualified the imperative of submission to civil authority in verse one by appealing to God's purpose for civil rulers in verses three and four as preconditions for the obedience of subjects, and they employed Lockean liberal and/or classical republican philosophy as a lens through which to view the passage and its contemporary application. In so doing, they became public spokesmen for evangelical laymen who chose to join the fight for American independence.

### **The Transformation of Isaac Backus**

In the midst of the imperial crises of the 1760s and 1770s, Baptists in New England and Virginia were chiefly concerned about the threat to religious liberty posed by colonial governments who enforced official support for established churches. In order to protect and extend religious liberty, Baptists came to adopt the principle of separation of church and state. According to Baptist historian, William Brackney, "What Baptists meant by separation of church and state was that the state had no inherent right to prosecute persons for matters of conscience and it was no worthy adjudicator between denominations of Christians, legitimating some and dismissing others."<sup>55</sup> It was not as though Baptists denied any necessity for collaboration between the state and churches, for like most evangelicals of the American colonial and early national periods, Baptists were idealistic about the potential for cooperation between civil and religious leaders. Prominent Massachusetts Baptist revivalist and pastor Isaac Backus expressed that idealism in a 1768 pamphlet, declaring that "as civil rulers ought to be men fearing God, and hating covetousness, and to be terrors to evil doers, and a praise to them who do well, and as ministers ought to pray for rulers and to teach the people to be subject to them, so there may and

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<sup>55</sup> William H. Brackney, *Baptists in North America: An Historical Perspective* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 41. "After some decades of state persecution for their religious beliefs, a number of Separate and Baptist evangelical leaders became convinced that the union of church and state led to the corruption of both." Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 24.

ought to be a sweet harmony between them. . . .”<sup>56</sup> Backus’ opinion was drawn from the New Testament with allusions to several texts, chiefly that of Romans 13. The phrases, “terrors to evil doers,” “a praise to them who do well,” and “to be subject” were adapted from verses one and three. According to Backus:

the Truth is, the Scriptures are given as our only perfect Rule, *which is able to build us up, and to give us an inheritance among all them which are sanctified, through Faith which is in Christ Jesus.* . . . And it is the Spirit of God, and that alone that enlightens our Minds to understand his Word aright, and that shews Men their Condition and their Duty, and guides his People into all Truth.<sup>57</sup>

Backus demonstrated his evangelical commitment to the authority of the Bible throughout his career by making its teaching fundamental to his political as well as theological views.<sup>58</sup>

The ideal of separate cooperative spheres of influence for church and state was not easily sold to political or established Congregational church leaders in Massachusetts, however, and the Baptist pastor’s work to end state taxation for the support of established churches and penalties for those who did not comply saw limited results in his lifetime.<sup>59</sup> For Baptists and many other

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<sup>56</sup> Isaac Backus, *A Fish Caught in His Own Net: an examination of nine sermons, from Matt. 16, 18, published last year by Mr[.] Joseph Fish of Stonington* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1768), 23, Eighteenth Century Collections, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T001&docId=CW119313484&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> (accessed June 4, 2014).

<sup>57</sup> Isaac Backus, *All True Ministers of the Gospel, are called into that work by the special influences of the Holy Spirit: A Discourse shewing the nature and necessity of an internal call to preach the everlasting Gospel* (Boston: Fowle in Ann Street, 1754), 17, Eighteenth Century Collections, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T001&docId=CW121268554&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> (accessed April 12, 2014). Emphasis in original.

<sup>58</sup> All Baptists in this era were evangelical. Backus’ evangelical credentials were reflected in the theology of his preaching, in his associations, and in his support for evangelical revival movements. McLoughlin states that “He [Backus] became a member of the Massachusetts Baptist Foreign Mission Society founded in 1803 and noted with delight the outbreak of the Second Great Awakening on the frontiers of Tennessee and Kentucky.” William G. McLoughlin, ed., *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism: Pamphlets, 1754-1789* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1968), 14-15.

<sup>59</sup> “The disestablishment of religion was neither an original goal nor completely a product of the Revolution. . . . These unplanned, unexpected conditions, lacking in completeness and justification, were touched by

evangelical Protestants, the hinge upon which such liberty turned was the right to select and support clergymen for their churches in neglect of the established church. The revivals of the Great Awakening emphasized the importance of regenerate ministers who proclaimed the teaching of the Bible with an evangelical focus. Baptists were among those who took this to its logical conclusion by insisting that the Spirit-filled congregation had the prerogative of evaluating, selecting and supporting only those ministers who demonstrated that they had also experienced personal conversion. This qualification, a personal experience of salvation through faith in Christ, was of far greater significance to Baptists than formal theological education.<sup>60</sup>

Two provisions of civil authorities in colonies with established churches were irksome to the conscience of evangelical Baptist Christians. First, only those licensed through the established church were permitted to preach. Licensure was problematic at several points for Baptists. It required lengthy and expensive formal education that was generally not available to men of the lower and middling classes in the colonies—groups from which the Baptists drew heavily. Licensure also caused Baptists to run afoul of established church doctrine on the point of infant (or pedo-) baptism, to which the Baptists could not subscribe. Finally, licensure brought evangelical Christians under the scrutiny of non-evangelical ministers who determined their fitness for service in the church. Even if these obstacles to official sanction could be overcome, the established church would still have to tolerate legal congregations outside the ecclesiastical hierarchy, something most were loath to do.

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the magic of Revolutionary thought, and were transformed.” Bailyn and Garrett, *Pamphlets*, vol. 1, 168. In similar fashion, revolutionary thought transformed the great proponent of disestablishment, Isaac Backus, into an ardent patriot.

<sup>60</sup> On the Great Awakening’s contribution to evangelical stress on regenerate clergy and Baptist insistence on conversion and a divine call to preach as qualification for ministry, see William G. McLoughlin, *Soul Liberty: The Baptists’ Struggle in New England, 1630–1833* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1991), 6-7, 95.

A second provision challenged Baptists in their pursuit of conscientious religion. The civil government collected mandatory taxes—in Massachusetts under the Standing Order—for the support of ministers in established churches. Massachusetts passed legislation providing exemptions for Baptists from the Standing Order tax as early as 1728 with four revisions through 1757, but various provisions in the laws required Baptists to register their congregations and provide certified membership rosters. Determination of qualification for exemptions was left in the hands of Congregational church authorities. Exemptions were difficult to come by even when conscience permitted Baptists to comply with the requirements. Continued protest against establishment in New England earned Baptists a reputation in some quarters for disloyalty to the patriot cause, but this was an unfair characterization as can be seen from the case of Backus.<sup>61</sup>

Living near Boston, a politically charged center of Whig agitation in the 1760s and 1770s, Backus kept a regular and extensive diary of his life and ministry in New England. Along with family and community happenings, Backus confided to his diary his own and others spiritual aspirations. He also cataloged the number of times he preached and where, the miles he traveled in ministry, and the reception or rejection of his evangelical preaching. At times he also recorded current political events and his reaction or thoughts in response. His diary was dominated by matters of spiritual concern characteristic of New Light revivalists, but at crucial flashpoints in what turned out to be the path toward national independence, Backus revealed his growing interest in political ideology. Over the course of about fifteen years, from the Stamp Act Crisis to the crucible of the Revolutionary War, Backus was transformed from a loyal subject of the Crown to a reformist evangelical supporter of American independence. Backus's transformation followed a course from disinterest in political matters to commentary with

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<sup>61</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 171.



opinion on current events and finally to active participation in the formation of new civil structures.

A visit on August 18, 1765 from “Mrs. Symonds of Boston” brought to the Backus home a shocking account of “Wild conduct!” in Boston, including the destruction of “Secretary” Andrew Oliver’s house. Pastor Backus recorded Mrs. Symonds’ tale in his diary as “an account of a strange tumult that was in Boston last Wednesday.” What had been described to him was, of course, the Boston Stamp Riot (or “Boston Crowd Action” as historian, Dirk Hoerder prefers).<sup>62</sup> Backus’ preeminent biographer, historian William McLoughlin, accurately noted that his “account of the affair [revealed] his pietistic lack of potential partisanship at this time.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Backus returned for weeks to making extensive notes on the progress of revival meetings in Massachusetts with no other mention of the event or continuing political turmoil. This impression of political disinterest was conveyed in subsequent diary entries through the fall of that year. For example, a month after Mrs. Symonds’ visit, Backus stayed briefly with his brother and caught up on the news. “I find that the whole Colony is moved with resentment,” Backus wrote, “against Jared Ingersoll of New-Haven [who] . . . is now returned Stamp-master for the Colony: they have hanged and burnt his effigies in many towns, and now they are going from all parts to visit him, tho’ not in a very friendly manner. We came forward to Coventry and had a pleasant and profitable interview with Elder Worden.”<sup>64</sup> His diary entry contains the most casual turn from political upheaval to commentary on his ministry itinerary, and most notably, not another word on political goings-on until his year-end summary on December 31. In that entry,

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<sup>62</sup> Hoerder, “Boston Crowds,” 235-238. My comment is intended as a good-natured dig at the neo-progressive, class-conscious yet highly insightful revisionist interpretation of Boston during the Stamp Act Crisis.

<sup>63</sup> Backus, *Diary*, vol. 2, 603.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 612.

Backus lamented a perceived decline in the “visitations” of spiritual revival compared to the previous year. He viewed the Stamp Act as chastisement for spiritual complacency in the colonies brought on by their wealth and abundance. In particular, he asserted that the “great breach” between England and “this country” resulted not only from the imposition of the Stamp tax, but because “the country refuses to submit” to it. Backus, therefore, distanced himself from the political debate. His year-end summary was consumed primarily with his efforts at “soul-winning” and he disdained the Stamp Act Crisis as mere “human affairs.”<sup>65</sup>

Backus did not comment on the March 1766 repeal of the Stamp Act until July 24. The only related line in the diary that day concerned the keeping of “a public thanksgiving” for its repeal. Though he did not identify the topic in his diary, Backus preached a sermon that day based on the text of Galatians 5:13. In the verse, the Apostle Paul cautions his readers against taking advantage of their “liberty” in Christ by serving their own desires. Instead, the apostle exhorted Christians to serve one another through love. In applying the text to his listeners, Backus declared that refusing “proper submission to civil authority” constituted a contemporary example of taking improper liberties in Christ.<sup>66</sup> Backus did not comment on Romans 13 in this sermon. Whether he viewed the command to “be subject unto the higher powers” as absolute or qualified, he appears not to have applied any qualification to the present circumstance. In his final entry for 1766 the Stamp Act appeared for the last time. After a summary analysis of revivals in Massachusetts and Connecticut, Backus turned briefly to the conclusion of the Stamp Crisis and its outcome: “Thus our liberties are continued, peace is restored, and we have plenty granted; but all this will not make us a happy people without a change of disposition and

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 621-622.

<sup>66</sup> Backus, *Diary*, vol. 2, 641. See McLoughlin’s comments on Backus’s July 24 entry.

behavior.”<sup>67</sup> True to form, the minister remained disinterested in the commotion of politics except as it might be a spur to the progress of revival.

By 1770, current events seemed to be breaking into Backus’s purview with greater intensity and generating increased interest. On March 8, he recorded the first of several diary entries based on information related to him about the Boston Massacre that took place on March 5. On that day, British troops that had been stationed in Boston since 1768 opened fire on a crowd, killing five.<sup>68</sup> There was a notable change in Backus’s tone and the way in which he dealt with this event compared to the previous flashpoint. He continued to emphasize religious concerns, but he now followed events closely, trying to sift facts from erroneous first reports and expressing his analysis on the pages of his diary. His language indicated that he had become more emotionally entangled with public affairs. At first he understood that colonists misbehaved in order to provoke the British response—an interpretation again favored by some historians—but upon further investigation during a trip to Boston on March 13, he came to lay blame on the British commander on the scene. With apparent relief he commented that “things appear more favorable on their [citizens] side than I at first heard.”<sup>69</sup>

It is noteworthy that the citizens involved were identified by Backus in the third person, suggesting his limited identification with the Boston crowd. But the significance of his comment

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<sup>67</sup> Backus, *Diary*, vol. 2, 655.

<sup>68</sup> Characterization of the event as a “massacre” can be attributed to a committee headed by James Bowdoin (1726-1790), who described it as such in a report to the Boston Town Meeting entitled, *A short narrative of the horrid massacre in Boston : perpetrated in the evening of the fifth day of March, 1770, by soldiers of the XXIXth Regiment, which with the XIVth Regiment were then quartered there: with some observations on the state of things prior to that catastrophe* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1770), Sabine Americana, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY102858891&srctp=a&ste=14> (accessed January 11, 2017). For a recent analysis of the “Boston Massacre” in 1770, see Neil L. York, *The Boston Massacre, A History with Documents* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>69</sup> Backus, *Diary*, vol. 2, 755.

lies more in the fact that such language had not been wholly absent from the diary previously. Expressiveness of this sort, however, had been reserved for circumstances of religious significance (e.g. revival, spiritual disinterest among nominal Christians, frivolous or wicked behavior). His use of emotive phrases in relation to the “massacre” increased to a level resembling that used for revival successes. He said the British behaved “barbarously,” the crowd was put “into a dreadful flame,” and exclaimed “God only knows what will be the end of these things.”<sup>70</sup> No one would question the emotional impact of such events so close to Backus’s own home (and in the hometown of his brother). But beyond a natural concern, in response to the Boston Massacre, Backus had moved from a disinterested observer to one who commented on political events with an opinion. He sided with the colonists, judging in his diary that their indignation was legitimate. Again, there was no reference to Romans 13, but Backus did appeal to the authority of God in a sermon preached on March 13 in Boston. Contrary to habit, he took the effort to record in his diary an important element of that sermon, claiming that he “had some clearness in pointing them to the over-ruling hand of God in their late troubles *by wicked men*.”<sup>71</sup> The combination of God’s sovereignty and British wickedness would later prove a basis for justifying colonial dissatisfaction with English rule and revolting against it. Finally, on March 16 he noted with no other “spiritual” report the withdrawal of the soldiers from Boston proper. This was the first time that Backus dedicated an entry solely to contemporary political affairs. Backus was now following such events more closely for their own sake.

Bailyn has argued that “The ideology of the Revolution, derived from many sources, was dominated by a peculiar strand of British political thought. It was a cluster of convictions

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 755-756.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 756-757. Emphasis mine.

focused on the effort to free the individual from the oppressive misuse of power, from the tyranny of the state.”<sup>72</sup> Whether one agrees with Bailyn’s neo-Whig interpretation that the ideological origins of the American Revolution are rooted in republicanism or with neo-Progressive interpretations that stress Lockean liberalism, Bailyn’s sense that many colonists in the 1770s thought of themselves as increasingly oppressed by tyrannical government was surely correct. Backus represented one non-elite New England colonist who came to believe and resent the intrusion of British tyranny.

Surprisingly, he was transformed in this way despite his continual dispute with colonial officials over matters of religious liberty which he held most dear. On May 26, 1774, Backus made an entry in his diary that signaled his recognition of Whig influence in the colonies and his willingness to adapt to the political metamorphosis currently in process. He and others of the Baptist association had determined not to appeal to the general court of Massachusetts “for relief from oppression from the pedobaptists party.” Instead, they chose to write to the Committee of Correspondence in order “to move them to use their influence here for our religious liberties.”<sup>73</sup> The liberties Backus sought were an end to restrictive licensure for Baptist clergymen and release from the Standing Order ecclesiastical tax. In writing to the Committee of Correspondence the Massachusetts Baptists were conscious that the first Continental Congress was due to open in Philadelphia in September and that the Philadelphia Baptist association would also meet there in October. Backus’s religious and political concerns were converging, theoretically and geographically. He and other Baptists leaders met with a committee of the Continental Congress on October 14 that included Thomas Cushing, John Adams, Samuel

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<sup>72</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, v-vi.

<sup>73</sup> Backus, *Diary*, vol. 2, 903.

Adams, Robert Treat Paine and others. They received little if any sympathy on the matters of religious oppression about which they complained. Backus wrote one of the longest entries found in his journal discussing the meeting and his disappointment in its outcome. He poignantly remarked in disgust: “Such absurdities does religious tyranny produce in great men.”<sup>74</sup> In his familiar annual summary at the end of 1774, Backus claimed that “This year will be remembered to late posterity for the great events of it. The port of Boston blocked up . . . our Charter rights invaded. . . . The Congress at Philadelphia from Sept. 5, to October 26 etc.”<sup>75</sup> Backus now marked annual progress in political as well as religious terms. Moreover, the use of the first person pronoun (“our Charter rights”) implied identification with colonial grievances not previously evident in his diary. His disappointment with the duplicity of the Continental Congress regarding religious liberty suppressed his enthusiasm, but his was now the disappointment of an insider. By the end of 1774, Backus was a reformist evangelical supporter of the patriot cause in that he sided with the colonies in their grievances against England, yet hoped that the principles of liberty would generate new sympathy for religious freedom at home among colonial leaders. New England Baptists generally supported the Revolution and Baptist churches multiplied there between 1778 and 1782. The considerable success of evangelical preaching in wartime even led Backus to suggest that, along with saving individuals from their sins, Baptist revivals may have saved Americans from the British—presumably either by gaining God’s support for the cause or by generating loyal patriots.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 917.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 929. For examples of Backus’s appeals to patriots on the basis of “liberty” consistently applied to religious tyranny, see Backus, *Diary*, vol. 3, 1595-1596.

<sup>76</sup> Kidd, *Great Awakening*, 313.

By the late 1770s, Backus had apparently internalized Lockean liberal political theory, for he incorporated it into his understanding of what it meant to “be subject unto the higher powers.” In August of 1779, he proposed a bill of rights to be attached to the new Massachusetts constitution. Backus’s thirteen points borrowed a great deal from Virginia’s 1776 constitution and thus, in certain places, bore resemblance to the American Declaration of Independence. But Backus’s bill of rights was adapted to emphasize the particular concerns of religious dissenters such as the Baptists. In his draft, Backus expressed his thorough agreement with Lockean principles of government, including what by then was already familiar terminology in the colonies. He declared that “All men are born equally free and independent [*sic*], and have certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights, among which are the enjoying and defending life and liberty, acquiring, possessing, and protecting property, and persuing and obtaining happiness and safety.” Shortly thereafter, Backus employed the Lockean triplet, “life, liberty and property.”<sup>77</sup>

Oblique references to the admonitions of Romans 13 were enveloped by the terminology of natural rights in his proposal. In point two of the proposed bill of rights, Backus defended the right of individuals to act according to conscience with regard to religious matters, stating that “civil rulers are so far from having any right to empower any person or persons, to judge for others in such affairs, and to enforce their judgments with the *sword*, that their *power* ought to be executed to protect persons and societies. . . .”<sup>78</sup> The selection of “power” in conjunction with “sword” in this context is certainly an allusion to the first four verses of Romans 13. Backus’s

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<sup>77</sup> Isaac Backus, “A Declaration of the Right, of the Inhabitants of the State of Massachusetts-Bay, in New England,” in Backus, *Diary*, vol. 3, 1605-1606.

<sup>78</sup> Backus, *Diary*, vol. 3, 1605. Emphasis mine. See also Isaac Backus, *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty, against the oppressions of the present day* (Boston, MA: John Boyle, 1773), 11-12, Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 12654, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.882004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=0F3014055D8EAE50&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.882004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F3014055D8EAE50&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed April 20, 2011).

clear intent was to establish limits for executive power. The biblical justification for the executive power of magistrates in Romans 13:4—“he beareth not the sword in vain”—was qualified in Backus’s view by the rational and biblical necessity to use that authority to do “good” for citizens under their rule, as the earlier part of verse four suggests. In other words, Backus, like other evangelical clergymen, turned what appeared to be a statement of civil authority’s purpose into a condition that limited the potential scope of civil authority. In keeping with contemporary republican political theory, he allowed citizens to be the final arbiters of whether or not their government exercised its authority for their welfare. Backus knew that his own State of Massachusetts was seriously deficient in extending what he and many other evangelicals considered essential religious rights. But he sided with the government of Massachusetts and the newly formed United States of America, believing that independence and the determined spread of individual liberties would set the stage for an era of religious freedom and spiritual renewal in the new nation. In the helpful terminology of Noll and Kidd, Backus represented a majority of evangelicals, especially in the northern colonies, who were “reformist” in their support for the Revolution.

### **Conclusion**

By shifting their focus from verse one to verses three and four and filtering their interpretation of the text through contemporary liberal and/or classical republican political theory, northern evangelicals were able to accommodate what Bailyn called “the logic of rebellion,” and to justify revolt against a British government that Whigs argued had abrogated its responsibilities to the colonies after the French and Indian War (1754-1763).<sup>79</sup> Yet even Bailyn’s

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<sup>79</sup> Bailyn and Garrett, eds. *Pamphlets*, vol. 1, 20-29. Bailyn identified four significant sources of revolutionary ideology and a fifth that he considered crucial because it joined the others into a “coherent whole” that proved “determinative” in forming intellectual opposition to British policies after 1763: republican heritage of classical antiquity (p. 21), writings of Enlightenment rationalism (23), tradition of English common law (26),



acknowledgment of the ideological significance of “political and social theories of New England Puritanism” fails to include an influential role for the Bible on the political attitudes of mid-eighteenth-century northern colonists.

When the influence of the biblical text on eighteenth-century American political thought is granted by scholars, the significance of the Old Testament is stressed almost to the exclusion of New Testament textual relevance.<sup>80</sup> Although accurate as far as it goes, this imbalanced attention to the place of the Old Testament during the Revolutionary Era—particularly in forming evangelical perspectives—neglects the very real struggle of those who sought to reconcile revolutionary urges with the New Testament principle of submission to civil authority. Backus illustrates both the concerns of what evangelicals might call New Testament Christianity and the challenges faced by northern evangelicals in the process of coming to support American independence.<sup>81</sup> Backus proves to be an excellent representative of the transformation required of evangelicals who supported the break with England, for, as McLoughlin, has rightly assessed:

To understand Backus is to understand the American evangelical mentality which went through the Age of Reason, deism, and rationalism almost unscathed, to emerge with greater devotion than ever to revivalistic religion. Backus’ career, bridging the gap between the First and Second Great Awakenings, between Edwards and Charles Grandison Finney, epitomizes the emergence of pietistic America.<sup>82</sup>

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political and social theories of New England Puritanism, especially ideas associated with covenant theology (27), and—key to Bailyn’s intellectual interpretation of revolutionary ideology—early eighteenth-century writers of religious dissent and opposition politics who relayed radical social and political thought of the English Civil war in the seventeenth century (28ff). For an insightful summary of the late-eighteenth-century Protestant evangelical “synthesis” with Scottish commonsense reasoning and republican ideology, see Noll, *America’s God*, 9-13.

<sup>80</sup> For instance, Shalev, *American Zion*, 52-60.

<sup>81</sup> “Isaac Backus’ great contribution to American social and intellectual history was his vigorous exposition in theory and practice of the evangelical principles of religion and society which gradually replaced Puritanism in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In particular, he was the most forceful and effective writer America produced on behalf of the pietistic or evangelical theory of separation of church and state.” McLoughlin, ed., *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism*, 1.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Backus, however, was by no means unique among northern evangelicals in his support for the patriot cause. I argue that these Christians felt compelled by their strong commitment to biblical authority to reconcile their views of the Revolution with the New Testament's teaching about civil authority. Many, in fact, made that attempt in their sermons and pamphlets. Patriot and reformist evangelicals in the north determined that when the government failed in its God-appointed duties, it was the responsibility of Christians to resist, even to the point of taking up arms against the "higher powers." In drawing such a conclusion, they made civil authorities accountable to the governed—a very popular revolutionary premise.

Perhaps most tellingly for American evangelical thought in the coming nineteenth century, northern evangelicals often supported the Revolution as reformists. That is, their hopes for American independence superseded the attainment of political liberties. Their justification of armed revolt was premised at least in part upon an expectation of greater opportunity for spiritual reform—individually and collectively—through the establishment of a new nation. Thus, as chapter two will demonstrate, it would become increasingly clear as the eighteenth century came to a close that the common motivation behind northern evangelical efforts to reconcile Romans 13:1-7 with rebellion against Great Britain was the belief that America's future greatness lay in its potential as a truly "Christian" nation.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Favoring Peace and Order: Northern Evangelicals Embrace the Early Republic, 1782–1795**

Given the high percentage of northern clerical support during the War for Independence, one should not be surprised to find similar levels of support for the new nation among northern evangelicals of various stripes. And, indeed, this was the case during the first decades of the early republic. Nevertheless, in order to sustain their calls for submission to civil authority in the United States, evangelical spokesmen were pressed to introduce subtle yet significant changes in their understanding and application of Romans 13:1-7. Having justified revolt against Great Britain based on its alleged biblical deficiencies and injustices in dealings with its American colonies, northern evangelicals found that they now desired to encourage submission to civil authorities who were likewise imperfect. The very same New Testament texts previously employed in support of revolution were redeployed in support of peace and order in the Early Republic.

This chapter will show that the combination of adjustments made by northern evangelicals to their understanding of the command to “be subject unto the higher powers” enabled them to promote peace and order almost as consistently as their former use of the passage justified what many contemporaries called rebellion. Evangelical adjustment involved first validating American civil authority by means of republican principles (a requirement not patently evident in the New Testament) and then deemphasizing their previously asserted use of verses three and four as a conditional qualifier of the initial command.<sup>1</sup> In the face of serious

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<sup>1</sup> “To sum up a situation that many historians now take for granted: after the 1780s, republicanism (wherever found along a continuum from classical to liberal) had come to prevail in America; very soon thereafter, commonsense principles (whether defined in elite or populist terms) were almost as widely spread; and in the same post-Revolutionary period, Protestant evangelicalism (however divided into contending sects) became the dominant

challenges to governmental legitimacy in the Early Republic, which often appeared, at least on the surface, to be rooted in remarkably similar complaints as those that had been laid against Great Britain by colonial Patriots, northern evangelicals turned the words of Romans 13 against Americans who would test the authority of the United States to govern their lives. Thus, the underlying question is why evangelicals reassessed the application of Romans 13:1 after America gained independence from Britain.<sup>2</sup> I argue that northern evangelicals reassessed and applied the text of Romans 13:1-7 after the Revolution to compel citizens of the Early Republic to submit to national authority primarily because they expected the United States to become the most truly “Christian” nation on earth.

### **Northern Evangelicals in the Early American Republic**

It became clear to evangelicals in the founding era of American republicanism—if it had not already been so in colonial debates over the respective authority of the King and Parliament—that defining “higher powers” was no simpler in representative government than it had been under a colonial monarchy. The separation of powers between executive, legislative and judicial branches in the Articles of Confederation and later Constitution of the United States complicated the definition and was further complicated by powers reserved to the States. Debate over proper submission to relative spheres of authority between the States and the federal government would, of course, help provoke the American Civil War (1861-1865) and continues

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American religion.” Noll, *America’s God*, 12. The relevant phrases in Romans 13:3-4 are, “For rulers *are not a terror to good works*, but to the evil. . . . for he is the minister of God *to thee for good*.” Emphasis mine.

<sup>2</sup> The chronological scope of this chapter’s analysis is informed by this question and by evidence for rapid change in evangelical uses of Romans 13 once American independence was substantially secured by the surrender of a British army under the command of Charles Cornwallis in Virginia in 1781. (For example, see my comments on the 1782 election sermon of Zabdiel Adams.) Tired of the war, the British government made preliminary arrangements for peace with American representatives in Paris in November 1782. The U.S. Congress officially acknowledged realities on the ground by declaring a cease-fire on April 11, 1783, and the war was formally concluded when the Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783.

to spur iterations of political contention in Congress and the courts in the second decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup>

Arguments concerning the locus of final government authority in practical terms cropped up with some regularity in the new American republic. And, successful transition from governance under the relatively weak and decentralized arrangement of the Articles of Confederation to a stronger federal system under the Constitution did not put an end to such arguments. Almost a decade after successful ratification of the Constitution, Thomas Jefferson described the federal government as a “foreign jurisdiction” to Virginia and appealed to the State legislature as the final authority in protecting constitutional liberties.<sup>4</sup> In the midst of often cantankerous debate regarding the legitimacy and exercise of civil authority during the Early Republic, northern evangelical voices consistently sought to garner public support for the federal government. Although he visualized nascent American nationalism decades earlier than many later historians would accept, historian Edward F. Humphrey nonetheless aptly summarized the continued influence of religion on the socio-political development of the Early American Republic. “At that time,” he contended in an influential 1924 work, “the pulpit was the most powerful single force in America for the creation and control of public opinion.”<sup>5</sup> One lesser-

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<sup>3</sup> For example, nine States now claim that Federal law cannot regulate firearms that are manufactured, sold and possessed in the same State. See John Hill, “North to the Future of the Right to Bear Arms: Analyzing the Alaska Firearms Freedom Act and Applying Firearm Localism to Alaska,” *Alaska Law Review* (June 2016), Academic OneFile, <http://go.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=ksu&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA457562542&asid=a6ec1d8c100cde3072b8e17d601d31ac> (accessed October 26, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 169-171 cf. 178, 187.

<sup>5</sup> Edward F. Humphrey, *Nationalism and Religion in America, 1774-1789* (Boston: Chipman Law Publishing Co., 1924), 4. Though dated, the influence of Humphrey’s analysis is attested by the longevity of its publication—new editions continued to appear for more than 40 years—and by its persistent presence in the footnotes, bibliographies and texts of scholarly studies right up to the present time. See, for example: Jeffrey S. Gurock, ed., *American Jewish History: The Colonial and Early National Periods, 1654–1840* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 155, 159; Harry M. Ward, “Going Down Hill”: *Legacies of the American Revolutionary War*

known minister, Congregationalist Zabdiel Adams (1739-1801), and two “powerful” spokesmen from American pulpits and college lecterns, Congregationalist Ezra Stiles (1727-1795) and Presbyterian John Witherspoon (1723-1794), serve to illustrate not only why northern evangelical Christians justified submission to civil authority in the Early Republic, but how quickly northern evangelical preaching shifted at the end of the war from justifying revolt to favoring submission.

In their fine collection of American political writings during the last four decades of the eighteenth century, editors Charles Hyneman and Donald Lutz correctly describe Zabdiel Adams’ May 1782 election sermon: “This is a mainstream analysis for the day and provides much of the reasoning underlying the design of state constitutions in the north, at least many of them.”<sup>6</sup> Hailing from the evangelical branch of a family tree that included more famous cousins John and Samuel, Zabdiel preached with the simple conviction of a man whose political as well as religious views were anchored in biblical revelation. His reasoning was less sophisticated than that of Stiles and Witherspoon (considered below). He appealed more often to Scripture alone in defense of his arguments than did either of the two better known scholars, notwithstanding their shared orthodox Protestant Bibliology. In many ways, Adams’ sermon echoed those of previous northern evangelical supporters of the War for Independence that had, for all intents and purposes, come to a close. He stressed the limits of monarchical power in keeping with English expectations since the Glorious Revolution (1688-1689), conceding only that “Whilst they [kings] keep within constitutional limits they cannot be resisted with impunity.”<sup>7</sup> And, he freely

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(Bethesda: Academia Press, 2009), 317; Lawrence G. Duggan, *Armsbearing and the Clergy in the History and Canon Law of Western Christianity* (New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), 42-43.

<sup>6</sup> Hyneman and Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing*, vol.1, 539.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 540-541.

applied this principle to any form of legitimate government (e.g. a republic, such as that being instituted in America). He also laid emphasis on the divine *role* of government to bring benefit to those under its authority and quoted Romans 13:3-4 to that effect twice. So far, the evangelical Congregational minister was on well-traveled ground.

But in two important ways, he shifted the emphasis of his argument from that of earlier evangelical supporters of the colonial cause. The first was explicit, the second subtle. Adams explicitly placed the notion of representative, elected rulers into the context of Romans 13 and used it to determine the legitimacy of civil authority. Thus, republicanism became in Adams' argument a preferred mode of government, one that virtually guaranteed the necessity for Christian submission. More subtly, the implied audience for Adams' exhortation was, in almost every instance of application, the ruled rather than the rulers. His sermon focused on the essential need for subjects (or citizens) to submit, rather than on the still-acknowledged need for government to serve the good of the people.

After quoting the entire text of Romans 13:1-7 along with a related affirmation in First Peter 2, Adams inserted the necessity of submission to republican forms of government, in particular. His effort to endorse the proper respect due a freely elected government led him to apparently unintended ironic comparison. Rather than merely proclaim the elevated legitimacy of popularly elected magistrates, he used a Roman "Dictator" to define the just demands of civil authority in America. "Upon the whole, therefore," he wrote, "I may be allowed to conclude that those rulers who are introduced into office by the choice of the people, and are *upright* and *faithful* in their stations, *ought* to be regarded as much as the Dictator, when he marched thro' the streets of Rome, preceded by *Lictors*, bearing *axes* and *rods*."<sup>8</sup> Adams' point seems to have

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 554. Emphasis in original.

been that ancient Roman crowds acknowledged the political power of Caesar, despite his having wrested it by force. How much more ought a grateful American public to acclaim the right of those *elected* to positions of authority in their republic?

Determined to press home the legitimacy of American civil authority, Adams went on to assert, “From those passages [Romans 13 and I Peter 2] it appears, not only that government is an ordinance of heaven, but also that obedience to it is a duty enjoined under the highest penalty. . . . We cannot resist such government without subverting the order, and interrupting the happiness of society.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, when taken as a whole, it is remarkable how this patriot’s sermon—preached barely two months after Congress officially declared the end of hostilities with Great Britain—focuses so completely on the duty of citizens to submit to civil authority. Adams assumed the undeniably good intentions of representative government, and repeatedly borrowed phrases from Romans 13 to bolster his calls for submission, declaring, “Government was instituted for the happiness of the community at large. Rulers are ministers of the people; they should be *ministers of God for good*, and where they are evidently so, there is but little danger of their commands being resisted. If the people oppose such power, thus benevolently exercised, it is an evidence they have fallen into a most distempered state, and are *nigh unto cursing*.”<sup>10</sup> Accessing the full weight of Christian polemics to dissuade his listeners (and later, readers) from discounting the seriousness of the offense, he warned that “Disobedience to such [authorities], exposes both to temporal and eternal punishments.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 550.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 541.



As president of Yale College, Stiles represented a similarly common attitude among northern evangelicals toward the newly independent republic. As a tutor at Yale in his twenties, he wrestled with the authority of the Bible and even courted Deism, but eventually embraced traditional Calvinist (“Old Light”) theology. Although Stiles opposed the New Divinity Theology of Jonathan Edwards and his disciples (e.g. Joseph Bellamy and Samuel Hopkins), and his scholarly and temperate demeanor caused him to distance himself from some of the more enthusiastic revivalism of his day, Stiles remained a strenuous proponent of biblical authority and ardently preached an evangelical gospel message.<sup>12</sup> Only a boy when the revivals of the Great Awakening began to sweep across New England, Ezra noted his father’s resistance to the enthusiasm it generated.<sup>13</sup> But, this did not mean that either he or his father was opposed to the evangelical message of conversion professed by the revivalists. Historian Edmund S. Morgan, author of numerous works on early American and Puritan history, including *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles*, noted that “Isaac Stiles [Ezra’s father] was himself adept” at preaching soul-stirring, “hell-fire” sermons calling the unconverted to salvation and church membership. “The Great Awakening,” Morgan believed, “which swept people into the churches in numbers never before known, seems to have arisen simply from a new method of preaching this kind of sermon.”<sup>14</sup> During his early ministry he evidenced sincere interest in the evangelical missionary

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel G. Reid et al., eds., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 553-554, 810-812, 1134-1135. Excellent entries on Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), New England Theology (1750-1850), and Ezra Stiles (1727-1795), respectively, demonstrate the value of examining eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American evangelical Christianity as a discrete classification of American Protestants that crossed denominational lines and overlapped nonetheless significant theological debates between traditional Protestants.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727-1795* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 22-23.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

efforts of David and John Brainerd to bring the gospel to Delaware Indians.<sup>15</sup> Late in life, Stiles' evangelistic expectations for America remained undiminished, even for one of the most prominent citizens of the United States, his friend, Benjamin Franklin.<sup>16</sup> And—in a show of evangelical ecumenism—in 1764, he joined thirty-five others, including Baptists John Gano and Backus in founding the College of Rhode Island (later Brown University), a school particularly evangelical in its early bearing.<sup>17</sup>

Stiles greatly admired the republican system of government and it persuaded him that the government of the United States deserved the submission of its Christian citizens. In a sermon before the governor and other elected officials of Connecticut in May 1783 (later published in book-length), he expressed his opinion that regular elections by the citizens of the country constituted the “crown and glory of our confederacy.”<sup>18</sup> This feature was the capstone accomplishment of the American federation, according to Stiles, assuring its worthiness in soliciting submission. Of all the governmental “policies to be found on earth,” he declared, “the

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<sup>15</sup> Kidd, *The Great Awakening*, 201.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin Franklin to Ezra Stiles, 9 March 1790, in Albert Henry Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 10: 1789–1790 (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1970), 84–85. It is not difficult to read between the lines of Franklin's letter that his friend had sought to assess the national founder's spiritual condition and perhaps to bring about his evangelical conversion before death (Franklin died just over a month later). In response, Franklin graciously offered the clearest expression we have of his religious beliefs, which disclaimed any confidence in the deity (“Divinity”) of Jesus of Nazareth and offered no evidence of personal faith in Christ for salvation from sin. See also, Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan*, 444–446.

<sup>17</sup> James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 8. The full original name of the institution was The College in the English Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

<sup>18</sup> Ezra Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor. A Sermon Preached before His Excellency Jonathan Trumbull, Esq. L. L. D, Governor and Commander in Chief, and the Honorable the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut, Convened at Hartford, at the Anniversary Election, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1783* (New Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1783), 23, Eighteenth Century Collections, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T001&docId=CB127083603&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> (accessed October 13, 2014).

most perfect one has been invented and realized in America.”<sup>19</sup> In his opinion of the superiority of republican government, this eighteenth-century evangelical minister reflected a growing trend. Mark Noll, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, has effectively demonstrated that by the late-eighteenth century American religious leaders across the broadest theological spectrum were “linking republicanism and religion” in order to validate the government of the United States as Christian in character.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, considering Stiles’ previously stated opinion of governments, informed by his Calvinistic theology of human depravity, the comments above represented high praise indeed. For, only a few pages before, the Yale president and professor had lamented that conquests and injustices of civil authorities over four thousand years of human history “have so changed property, laws, rights and liberties, that it has become impossible for the most sagacious *civilians* to decide whose is the abstract political right in national controversies—rather we know that none of them have any right. All original right [of authority] is confounded and lost.” Instead, final authority in government must be found in “the body of the people at large,” which retains “a POWER with which they are invested by

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>20</sup> Noll, *America’s God*, 71 cf. 79-80. Chapters 4 and 5 of Noll’s book explore the development and uniqueness of American religious commitment to republicanism. See also, Jonathan Mayhew, *A discourse concerning unlimited submission and non-resistance to the higher powers: with some reflections on the resistance made to King Charles I. and on the anniversary of his death: in which the mysterious doctrine of that prince’s saintship and martyrdom is unriddled: the substance of which was delivered in a sermon preached in the West Meeting-House in Boston the Lord’s-Day after the 30th of January, 1749/50. Published at the request of the hearers. By Jonathan Mayhew, A.M. Pastor of the West Church in Boston* (Boston: D. Fowle and D. Gookin, 1750), Eighteenth Century Collections, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T001&docId=CW121078547&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> (accessed October 22, 2014); J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660-1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 364-370. Though Jonathan Mayhew’s 1750 sermon on Romans 13:4 represents a definitively non-evangelical viewpoint, Noll perceptively situates Mayhew’s influential address in the flow of American religious adoption of republican principles. By placing the sermon in a context of colonial Protestant anti-Catholicism, Noll succeeds in modifying Jonathan Clark’s otherwise helpful interpretation that Mayhew represents heterodox sources of religious republicanism. Noll argues that American Christian republicanism need not be inextricably linked to heterodoxy.

the author of their being, to wrest government out of the hands of reigning tyrants, and originate NEW POLICIES, adapted to the conservation of liberty and promoting the public welfare.”<sup>21</sup> He believed this happy result to be the natural consequence of America’s specific manifestation of republican government, which could not help but dispel any form of tyranny that might compromise its qualification as a “higher power,” deserving of the Christian’s obedience (Romans 13:1). The powers reserved to the people in the American democratic republic, according to Stiles, were such that “a political mischief cannot be durable.” Other republican-influenced systems—the “Belgic states” and “Poland,” for example—left room at one level of administration or another for tyranny and despotism. “Not so the American states,” he extolled, for “their interior as well as exterior civil and jural policies are so nearly perfect, that the rights of individuals, even to numerous millions, are guarded and secured.”<sup>22</sup> But Stiles did not call for obedience to the authority of the United States singularly or primarily on the basis of its superior system of government. Rather he appealed to something else that drew from him extended comment and enthusiastic hope.

In the same work, this religious and academic pillar of northern society applauded what he considered to be the obvious providential designs for the United States. He began by quoting the words of Deuteronomy 26:19 in application to the new nation, acknowledging that they originally described ancient Israel: “And to make thee high above all nations, which he hath made in praise, and in name, and in honor; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the Lord thy God.”<sup>23</sup> Stiles’ selection is little different than many similar Puritan tropes from previous

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<sup>21</sup> Stiles, *United States Elevated to Glory and Honor*, 16-17. Use of upper case in original.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 23 cf. 14. Stiles had previously voiced his expectation that slavery would “die out” with the peoples (Indians and Africans) on which it was sustained in America, and thus saw no irony or contradiction regarding the rights of individuals on those grounds.

generations, but nonetheless noteworthy for its anticipatory hope that America might *become* a nation of uniquely religious people. The sermon especially testifies to the author's exuberance in support of the infant republic. "And who does not see," he asked rhetorically, "the indubitable interposition and energetic influence of divine providence in these great and illustrious events [the War for Independence]?"<sup>24</sup> That he perceived—and defended against critics—the basis for America's future growth and success in terms of its growing Christian character was evident by the manner in which he prefaced his assertions of divine intervention on the side of the former colonists: "I am sensible some will consider these as visionary utopian ideas. And so they would have judged, had they lived in the apostolic age and been told, that by the time of constantine [*sic*] the empire would have become Christian."<sup>25</sup> Thus, Stiles' defense for the rationality of otherwise "visionary utopian ideas" about the progress of the United States was based upon the young nation's prospects of becoming a truly Christian republic. Indeed, he put forward a radically libertarian vision of America as a Christian nation that would have been palatable to few Protestant denominations and not all evangelicals at the time. He spelled out this vision before the Connecticut authorities, forecasting that "The united states will embosom all the religious sects or denominations in christendom. Here they may all enjoy their whole respective systems of worship and church government, complete."<sup>26</sup> His prediction helps explain his cooperation with Baptists in founding the College of Rhode Island. But more vitally, for the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 5 cf. 7. See also, Ibid., 35: "And we have reason to hope, and I believe to expect, that God has still greater blessing in store, for this vine which his own right hand hath planted, to make us *high among the nations in praise, and in name, and in honor.*"

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 54. Stiles even included Roman Catholics by name among those who would find "complete" freedom in this most Christian of lands, a position hardly representative of the majority of Protestants in his day. Original case retained in capitalization.

purpose of this chapter, it serves to contextualize evangelical claims regarding the legitimacy of the government of the United States, situating calls for citizens to submit to its civil authority in the sphere of evangelical hopes of converting the new nation.

Witherspoon, who was not only a Presbyterian minister but president of the College of New Jersey (later re-named Princeton University), played an important role in disseminating Scottish Common Sense Moral Philosophy in late colonial America. In the intellectual suppositions of this ubiquitously influential eighteenth-century American philosophical framework, Witherspoon found answers to political questions that were addressed by—in his own estimation—the authoritative revelation of the New Testament. In Common Sense Moral Philosophy, he found culturally relevant explanations of submission to civil authority that shaped his understanding of the meaning and application of the command to obey civil authorities in Romans 13:1. It is evident that Witherspoon neither ignored nor discounted the relevance of the command found in this verse to obey the “higher powers” or the warning for failure to do so found in verse two. Nevertheless, even as an evangelical Presbyterian, committed to the Bible’s teaching as God’s authoritative Word to mankind and to believers in particular, he allowed his understanding and application of that command to be shaped by current cultural ideas about political morality in the context of America’s relation to Great Britain.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “Being the most eminent American Presbyterian of the late eighteenth century in turn made Witherspoon one of the most eminent clergymen in all America at that time.” Jeffry H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 6 cf. 61; John Witherspoon, “Speech in Congress on the Convention with General Burgoyne,” in John Witherspoon, *The Works of Rev. John Witherspoon, D.D.L.L.D., Late President of the College at Princeton, New-Jersey. To Which is Prefixed an Account of the Author’s Life, in a Sermon occasioned by his Death, by the Rev. Dr. John Rogers, of New-York*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1802), 273-279. For a helpful analysis of the influence of Scottish Common Sense Moral Philosophy on the thinking of Witherspoon, see Morrison, *John Witherspoon*, 45-69, and Noll, *America’s God*, 105-106, cf. 93-95, 209-210. On the topic more generally, see Scott Philip Segrest, *America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), and Alexander Broadie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Two works, one a sermon published at the end of the War for Independence and the other a book published posthumously based upon extensive lecture notes from Witherspoon's capstone course on "Moral Philosophy" at The College of New Jersey, offer insight into how evangelical Protestants addressed the subject of submission to civil authority during the Early Republic.<sup>28</sup> Developed over years of teaching, his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* addressed humanity's moral duties, especially under the primary headings of ethics and politics.<sup>29</sup> Concerning the autumn 1782 discourse, historian and Witherspoon specialist Jeffrey H. Morrison points out, "This sermon is particularly interesting because he [Witherspoon] gave it just after his retirement from Congress, in response to a Congressional Thanksgiving Day proclamation he had written himself."<sup>30</sup> Having harnessed his influence in the Congress to create for himself and other ministers an occasion to justify submission to the triumphant young republic, his Thanksgiving sermon at the conclusion of the War reflected an evangelical integration of contemporary political theory and biblical teaching to promote both individual liberty and civil submission.

Witherspoon's writings illustrate the full range of theological and rational arguments that supplemented scriptural teaching in the minds of many well-educated eighteenth-century evangelicals as they approached the subject of submission to civil authority. Addressing the Christian's duty to mankind in his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Witherspoon incorporated arguments from classical liberalism along with historically Calvinist theology and scriptural

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<sup>28</sup> Morrison, *John Witherspoon*, 133-135. Morrison, a leading historian of Witherspoon and his thought, has shown that this sermon, though dated 1783 in the published account, was actually delivered on November 28, 1782, before the war officially ended. The phrase "After Peace" was apparently supplied later by the publisher. Nevertheless, Witherspoon's address clearly assumes that peace has returned to the new nation and the publisher's use of the phrase was not unwarranted. Indeed, sources underlying the current chapter have led me to periodize my analysis of northern evangelical views about civil authority during the Early Republic as having begun to be reassessed before the Treaty of Paris formally concluded the Revolutionary War in September of 1783.

<sup>29</sup> Witherspoon, *Works*, vol. 3, 369.

<sup>30</sup> Morrison, *John Witherspoon*, 22.

teaching.<sup>31</sup> He appealed unapologetically to Lockean principles and occasionally quoted from enlightened philosophes, calling them, “Some of the chief writers upon government and politics.”<sup>32</sup> Despite his firmly patriotic stance during the War for Independence, he limited the requirements of patriotic affection for one’s nation by means of Jesus’ teaching on love for enemies (Matthew 5:43-48) and by application of the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Yet, he supplemented his argument with a summary of “natural or acquired” and “alienable and unalienable” rights.<sup>33</sup> It is clearly evident that Witherspoon intended his discussion to be a foundation for Christian political obligations: “When we come to the second great division of moral philosophy, politics, the above definitions [of individual rights] will be more fully explained—at present it is sufficient to point at them in order to show what are the great lines of duty from man to man.”<sup>34</sup> From there, the Christian professor and statesman spelled-out what he believed to be those “great lines of duty.”

Because he recognized that the exercise of civil authority over others potentially conflicted with ideals of individual rights, Witherspoon held the legitimacy of civil authority to be of utmost concern. Indeed, without diminishing the indispensability of individual rights, he defined legitimate civil authority as having “Rights over the persons and actions of other men.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Moral Philosophy is that branch of Science which treats of the principles and laws of Duty or Morals. It is called *Philosophy*, because it is an inquiry into the nature and grounds of moral obligation by reason, as distinct from revelation. . . . I do not know anything that serves more for the support of religion than to see from the different and opposite systems of philosophers, that there is nothing certain in their schemes, but what is coincident with the word of God.” Witherspoon, *Works*, vol. 3, 367-368.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 472. For example, Witherspoon refers to Locke’s principle of the right of self-defense on p.407 and quotes Hobbes on p.418.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 405-409.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*



In *Moral Philosophy*, Witherspoon presented an argument for submission to civil authority that was rooted in reformed Protestant concepts of duty toward God and His dominion. This foundation in *Moral Philosophy* would have been held in common among almost all evangelicals, but especially among Calvinist evangelicals due to the centrality of the sovereignty of God in Reformed theology.<sup>36</sup> “Having considered the being and perfection of God,” he wrote, “we proceed to our duty to him.” In general, according to Witherspoon, submission to God’s “divine dominion” included “every branch of moral duty to our neighbor and ourselves, as well as to God,” and it was under this theological rubric that he stressed the importance of individual submission to civil authority as an expression of obedience to God.<sup>37</sup>

But the fact of divine dominion did not in and of itself validate civil authorities and require submission of subjects (or citizens), according to Witherspoon. Instead, he emphasized that magistrates must both deserve and cultivate the submission of subjects, and that religion and morality led most directly to that end. Witherspoon’s sermon, *Delivered at a Public Thanksgiving after Peace*, strongly employed the language of civic humanism on this score, stressing the requirement of public virtue in a republic. “Those who are vested with civil authority,” he declared, “ought[t] also with much care, to promote religion and good morals among all under their government. . . . So true is this, that civil liberty cannot be long preserved without virtue.”<sup>38</sup> Moreover, while religion and morality were “especially incumbent on those

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<sup>36</sup> John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 72-73, 198-201, 219-220.

<sup>37</sup> Witherspoon, *Works*, vol. 3, 408.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 82. Noll, *America’s God*, 12, 56-57, 75-81. Noll helpfully places American religious conceptions of “virtue” in the context of various eighteenth-century understandings of the term among proponents of classical republican theory. He argues that the ambiguity of “virtue” as a translation of Machiavelli’s “virtù” helped Protestants in the American context—especially evangelicals—embrace republicanism, whereas other traditional Christians around the Atlantic World were antagonistic or ambivalent to the political form.

who are honored with places of power and trust,” Witherspoon did not believe that personal piety alone sanctioned civil authority. As a demonstration of their own moral virtue, it was incumbent on rulers to earn and justly limit the spheres their authority. They must act in accordance with New Testament directives regarding the responsibilities of government. Thus, like those who had earlier criticized Great Britain’s policies in the American colonies, he appealed to Romans 13:3 when he averred, “It is certainly the official duty of magistrates to be ‘a terror to evil doers, and a praise to them that do well.’”<sup>39</sup> On the premise of this biblical teaching, his *Moral Philosophy* attempted to integrate state responsibilities, individual liberties, and civil submission within the context of a virtuous republic, the United States of America.

In order to sustain these elements of a virtuous republic, Witherspoon believed that “The essential rights of rulers, are what require most to be enumerated,” among which the more important rights were legislation, taxation, the administration of justice, and representation of the nation in relations with other states.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, he held, “The rights of subjects in a social state, cannot be enumerated, but they may be all summed up in *protection*, that is to say, those who have surrendered part of their natural rights, expect the strength of the public arm to defend and improve what remains.”<sup>41</sup> For Witherspoon, strictly limited rights for civil authorities combined with a just expectation of official protection for expansive individual rights to constitute a Lockean-like social contract. Against those who would “say there is no trace or record of any such [social] contract in the beginning of any society,” he contended, “When persons believe themselves upon the whole, rather oppressed than protected in any society, they

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<sup>39</sup> Witherspoon, *Works*, vol. 3, 83.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

think they are at liberty to rebel against it, or fly from it; which plainly implies that their being subject to it, arose from a tacit consent.”<sup>42</sup> Following Locke’s example, Witherspoon held that the social contract implies citizens’ right of revolt. He insisted that “Though people have actually consented to any form of government, if they have been essentially deceived in the nature and operation of the laws, if they are found to be pernicious and destructive of *the ends of the union*, they may certainly break up the society, recall their obligation, and resettle the whole upon a better footing.”<sup>43</sup> Witherspoon’s use of the phrase, “the ends of the union,” was again reminiscent of Romans 13:3-4, which identify the “ends” (goals or purposes) of civil authority as punishing evil behavior, praising good behavior, and serving as a conduit of God’s good provisions for people.<sup>44</sup> His lecture notes on *Moral Philosophy* continued with an extended discussion of what constitutes governmental tyranny and when the right of rebellion (an overthrow of the state) is warranted.<sup>45</sup> Yet, what is most illuminating of Witherspoon’s evangelical assessment of the American Republic is that he utilized Romans 13 to reassert the need for submission to civil authority, even in a republic that would, like every government, establish some laws that were “arbitrary” and distressing. Having addressed the “Rights of Necessity and common Rights” in human community, Witherspoon concluded with a brief

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<sup>42</sup> “(1.) The consent of every individual to live in, and be a member of that society. (2.) A consent to some particular plan of government. (3.) A mutual agreement between the subjects and rulers; of subjection on the one hand, of protection on the other—These are all implied in the union of every society, and they compleat the whole.” Ibid., 419 cf. 430.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 432. Emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> God’s purpose for civil authority was a common concern among evangelicals in the late-eighteenth century. Ezra Stiles’ treatise, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor* (1783), cited above, also combined elements of republican virtue (interpreted as Christian holiness) and the proper goal of government under God: “We may then consider . . . That our system of dominion and CIVIL POLITY would be imperfect, without the true RELIGION; or, that from the diffusion of virtue among the people of any community, would arise their greatest secular happiness: which will terminate in this conclusion, that Holiness ought to be the end of all civil government.” Stiles, *United States Elevated to Glory and Honor*, 7. Use of upper case in original.

<sup>45</sup> Witherspoon, *Works*, vol. 3, 436-439.

summary “on the nature and spirit” of civil laws, many of which he considered “arbitrary” rather than morally-based. Nevertheless, he insisted, based upon an application of Romans 13:5, “Finally, a man of real probity and virtue [read, true Christian] adopts these laws as a part of his duty to God and the society, and is *subject not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake*.”<sup>46</sup> Modern readers may be excused for finding these comments surprising, because arbitrary laws were precisely the justification given by Witherspoon and others for “recall[ing] their obligation, and resettle[ing] the whole upon a better footing” during the American War for Independence from Great Britain.<sup>47</sup> In this case, however, the Patriot professor applied Romans 13 to prevent rather than to permit revolt against laws perceived to be unjust. His discussion of American privations in service of the Patriot cause in the sermon, *Delivered at a Public Thanksgiving after Peace* (1782), confirms that Witherspoon came to see submission to civil authority in the Early Republic as not solely dependent upon just laws, but upon compelling reasons for even distressing laws: “because of the important purpose that was to be served by them.”<sup>48</sup> His use of Romans 13 to bolster submission to American civil authorities despite hints of legal abuses similar to those experienced under English colonial rule suggests that, like Stiles and other northern evangelicals, Witherspoon anticipated the United States becoming a virtuous, Christian republic where state responsibilities, individual liberties, and civil submission harmoniously coexist. The attainment of such a republic would prove to be more difficult than Witherspoon and other evangelicals foresaw.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>47</sup> “The most peaceable means were first used [by American colonists to appeal to Great Britain]; but no relaxation could be obtained: one arbitrary and oppressive act followed after another; they destroyed the property of a whole capital [Boston]—subverted to its very foundation, the constitution and government of a whole colony [Massachusetts], and granted soldiers a liberty of *murdering* in all the colonies.” Witherspoon, *Works*, vol. 4, 302.

<sup>48</sup> Witherspoon, *Works*, vol. 3, 74.

## **The Meaning of Submission in the Face of Challenges to Civil Authority**

### **Shays' Rebellion**

In 1786, a revolt known as Shays' Rebellion broke out in western Massachusetts against a state judicial decision that seemed to favor wealthy, eastern banking interests against those of western farmers and frontiersmen in the matter of mortgages and the issuance of paper money (or lack thereof).<sup>49</sup> Many in the federal government also perceived the revolt as a challenge to the authority of the young republic. As Secretary at War in 1786, Henry Knox wrote feverish letters of warning regarding the safety of military stores at the federal arsenal in Springfield, Massachusetts. Nevertheless, though Shaysites were in Springfield in December 1786 in sufficient numbers to force the closure of the state's Supreme Judicial Court, they made no threats against the facility or its weapons. In his thoughtful introduction to a 1987 collection of essays on Shays' Rebellion, Larry Lowenthal, Director of the Springfield Armory National Historic Site, correctly assesses the relevance of Shays' early respect for the armory. "This often overlooked factor," he states, "defines the character of the 'insurrection' and is critical to understanding those events."<sup>50</sup> He further notes that the men who followed Shays did not initially think of themselves as "insurgents" or "rebels," descriptive labels used by authorities in Boston. Rather, the Shaysites were more likely to call themselves "regulators." "This now-obsolete term," Lowenthal argues, "accurately describes their intentions toward government: they wanted to regulate it, not overthrow it."<sup>51</sup> Some might contend that Lowenthal's characterization of the

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<sup>49</sup> Robert A. Gross, ed., *In Debt to Shays: The Bicentennial of an Agrarian Rebellion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 11-12; Leonard L. Richards, *Shays's Rebellion: The American Revolution's Final Battle* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 6-8, 83-85.

<sup>50</sup> Martin Kaufman, ed., *Shays' Rebellion: Selected Essays* (Westfield: Institute for Massachusetts Studies, Westfield State College, 1987), xv.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

“regulators” as peaceful and reticent to employ violence is excessively generous, but his point regarding the complainants’ behavior in 1786 is well taken. David P. Szatmary, whose 1980 book on Shays’ Rebellion is still a valuable source on those events, concurs that as late as December, Shays “had no intention of attacking the federal stores” at Springfield. By January, however, according to Szatmary, “the mercantile interest pushed debt-ridden farmers toward more radical action.”<sup>52</sup> His conclusion is certainly correct. Governor James Bowdoin’s decision to raise a 4,400-man mercenary force against the Shaysites undoubtedly pushed the “regulators” over the line into outright rebellion.<sup>53</sup>

Historian Leonard L. Richards added considerably to an already well-covered historical narrative when he published his insightful 2002 study of the common citizens who participated in Shays’ Rebellion. Richards discovered with surprise that “the Massachusetts Archives had the names of the Shaysites, not just the names of the leaders, but some four thousand names.”<sup>54</sup> His subsequent research yielded a fuller understanding of the social context and consequences of the revolt. Richards’ study, though more thorough in its analysis of the social history of the revolt, supports Szatmary’s conclusion that the fundamental clash between the two sides was that of “traditional ideals of an agrarian culture” and those “supporting mercantile interests.”<sup>55</sup> According to Richards, militias from the western part of the state—often sympathetic with the cause of the “regulators” and reluctant to employ force against them—reacted with hostility to Governor Bowdoin’s decision to hire an army under the command of General Benjamin Lincoln

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<sup>52</sup> David P. Szatmary, “Shays’ Rebellion in Springfield,” in Kaufman, *Shays’ Rebellion*, 13, 15. In his essay, Szatmary details events while focusing on economic issues leading to the unrest. See also, David P. Szatmary, *Shays’s Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

<sup>53</sup> Richards, *American Revolution’s Final Battle*, 23-26.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>55</sup> Szatmary, “Shays’ Rebellion in Springfield,” in Kaufman, *Shays’ Rebellion*, 16.

that would be both loyal to the state and capable of defeating the rebels. Their threatening reaction surprised Lincoln, yet at least some of those present at the time believed the situation could have become far more dangerous had it not been for the influence of American clergymen. Richards highlights the opinion of one of Lincoln's aides: "Nonetheless . . . it would have been much worse had it not been for the clergy. Their conservatism and the respect people had for them was all that kept 'large numbers of Inhabitants' from taking up arms against the state."<sup>56</sup> The aide's depiction of Massachusetts clergy as politically conservative—supportive of established authority—should not be taken as natural and expected. Only recently, northern clergymen had overwhelmingly and enthusiastically supported America's rebellion against established English rule. Why then could they be counted on in this instance to support the established authority of Massachusetts and the United States? On the contrary, since the perpetrators of Shays' Rebellion couched their resistance to state judicial authority in language similar to that which patriots had used in their revolt from Great Britain, it is instructive to evaluate how northern evangelicals who supported the American Revolution responded to this challenge to U.S. authority, and why, as Lincoln's aide claimed, they chose to stand in this case on the side of established authorities.

The evidence suggests that a remarkable reassessment of the meaning of the command, "be subject unto the higher powers," had taken place since the Revolution and continued in the midst of the circumstances of Shay's Rebellion. For example, Backus responded with a pamphlet before the crisis was over that gave full attention to the force of Romans 13:1, but made no mention of the qualifying conditions in 13:3-4 that had figured prominently in his justification of

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<sup>56</sup> Richards, *American Revolution's Final Battle*, 26.

the American Revolution.<sup>57</sup> In his March 1787 essay, *An Address to the Inhabitants of New-England, Concerning the present Bloody Controversy therein*, he argued that because upcoming elections would afford those with complaints the opportunity to elect replacements and accomplish a peaceful and constitutional transfer of power, there was no legitimate basis for rebellion against the current civil magistrates. “This is the true nature of our [State] Constitution,” Backus declared, “and the command of God is, *Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake*.”<sup>58</sup> Although he quoted in this case from the New Testament book of Second Peter, Backus referenced immediately “Rom. xiii. 1–10.” The combined force of these verses in Backus’ usage reflected evangelical confidence in the authority and applicability of New Testament scripture to contemporary political realities. There was no doubt in the mind of the Baptist minister in this instance, for he went on to insist, “His [God’s] revealed will, enforced in the name of the *Lord our righteousness*, is as clear as *glass*, and as powerful as *fire*; it being the only *perfect law of liberty*.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, Backus believed it to be the clear will of God—based on Romans 13:1 and other New Testament commands—for those who were presently in rebellion to submit to the authority of state and federal governments.

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<sup>57</sup> On Backus’ earlier “transformation” on the subject of submission to civil authority, see pp. 57-68. For a summary of the conclusion of Shays’ Rebellion (gradual as it was), see Richards, *American Revolution’s Final Battle*, 30-36.

<sup>58</sup> Isaac Backus, *An Address to the Inhabitants of New-England, Concerning the present Bloody Controversy therein* (Boston: S. Hall, 1787), 6, Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 20212, [http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=0F2F82D9CEE0AF70&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98F881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F2F82D9CEE0AF70&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98F881AFD3E266DE) (accessed March 12, 2014). Emphasis in original. Backus’ comments were written some three months before members of the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia and drafted the federal Constitution to replace the Articles of Confederation. Thus, the “Constitution” to which he refers would be the Massachusetts State Constitution, from which Backus had sought unsuccessfully to exclude Church establishment.

<sup>59</sup> Backus, *Address to the Inhabitants of New-England*, 6.



Elizur Goodrich (1734-1797), an evangelical Congregational minister in neighboring Connecticut came to a similar conclusion as that of Backus.<sup>60</sup> While he never explicitly referenced Shays or Massachusetts in his election sermon before state officials on May 10, 1787, Goodrich alluded to recent discontent, especially among farming interests, and to disturbances in public unity that threatened the “peace and order” of American society. And, it was clear that he had little sympathy for elements in society that were willing to threaten the peace as a result of their political grievances, let alone for the sake of financial interests. If he sympathized with any financial interests in the Shays’ dispute, it was those of the mercantilists and bankers. Disdaining rural calls for a cheaper money supply, he acclaimed the benefits of moral virtues like thriftiness, and chided, “Had we a thousand tons of silver dispersed in this state, in such a manner as should check the growth of those virtues, it would be truly the root of all evil, and dispose us to such a conduct, that in a few years, this mighty sum would vanish and the people become reduced to a more wretched state of indigence and want, than before.”<sup>61</sup> Moreover, consistent with his belief

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<sup>60</sup> Timothy Dwight, *A Discourse Preached at the Funeral of the Reverend Elizur Goodrich D.D. Pastor of the church in Durham, and one of the Members of the Corporation of Yale-College; by the Reverend Timothy Dwight, D.D. President of Yale-College; November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1797* (New Haven: T. and S. Green, 1797), 26ff, Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 32069, [http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=0F2FD354A651B528&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F2FD354A651B528&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed January 11, 2017). Yale President Timothy Dwight (1752-1817) twice described Goodrich as “evangelical” in the sermon and went on to give an evangelical summary of the gospel to those present when reviewing what their pastor had taught them from the pulpit. That Goodrich considered himself an evangelical Christian is confirmed by his comments in Elizur Goodrich, *The Principles of Civil Union and Happiness Considered and Recommended. A sermon, preached before His Excellency Samuel Huntington, Esq. L.L.D. governor and commander in chief, and the Honorable the General Assembly of the state of Connecticut. Convened at Hartford, on the day of the anniversary election, May 10th, 1787* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1787), 26, 47, 48-49, Early American Imprints, Series 1, no.20393, [http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=0F3018CE5D79F988&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F3018CE5D79F988&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed November 28, 2014).

<sup>61</sup> Goodrich, *Principles of Civil Union and Happiness*, 56. For context, see pages 54-55, where, without naming Shays, Goodrich goes straight to the point of contention in Massachusetts: “But if these burdens [of government demand] are just, the price of our liberty, and of all the privileges which we enjoy, what can our rulers do, but encourage us to be a righteous and industrious people, and contrive the best, most easy and effectual measures for discharging the public debt? . . . But, it will be said, they can emit a bank of paper money, the benefit

in the orthodox Calvinistic doctrine of “the present depraved state of human nature,” he asserted that “civil government” must play a necessary role in the management of human sinfulness, which otherwise threatened community. Referencing “jarring interests,” “unruly passions,” and “the jealousies and misapprehensions of neighbours,” Goodrich concluded, “To prevent this mischief, and to secure the enjoyment of rational liberty, which summarily consists in the unmolested privilege and opportunity of ‘leading a quiet and peaceable life,’ is the great end of the institution of civil society and government.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, his sermon stressed the need for Americans to submit to state authority.

While Goodrich reasoned within the framework of Common Sense universal laws as applied in philosophy to government, he nevertheless elevated biblical revelation above reason, locating reasonable guidelines for civil community within the final standard of Scripture. The teaching of Romans 13 was delivered, he asserted, “as a divine injunction upon christians [*sic*],” and, in a thinly veiled reference to the recent rebellion in Massachusetts, emphasized that Paul’s doctrine was “profitable for all ages, and especially seasonable for the present.”<sup>63</sup> The significance of Goodrich’s discourse for the present study was not that he ignored previous condemnations of tyranny and abuse by governments. In a blend of Lockean and biblical language he admitted that constitutional government was worthy of defense when “the laws, rights and properties of a free people are openly invaded,” and that such resistance to tyranny—

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of which was experienced in former times. A mighty benefit; a blessed privilege, indeed, if it be on such a sinking foundation, that the dishonest taking advantage of its depreciation may defraud their creditors, and live and riot on the simplicity of their neighbours, and the spoils of public faith.”

<sup>62</sup> Goodrich, *Principles of Civil Union and Happiness*, 10-11. Goodrich quoted a phrase from the New Testament letter of the Apostle Paul, 1 Timothy 2:2, and probably implied the teaching of Romans 13:4 by using the phrase, “the great end of . . . government,” which was a common expression of the time in reference to governmental responsibility toward subjects/citizens.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

“consistent with this doctrine of the apostle [Paul]”—ought not to be called rebellion.<sup>64</sup> On the contrary, and with little elaboration, Goodrich claimed Romans 13 provided “an effectual guard” against tyranny. Nevertheless, he followed these concessions with a challenge, which in May of 1787 could only have been directed at the instigators of Shays’ Rebellion. “But who will imagine,” Goodrich asked rhetorically, “that GOD, whose first law, in the world of nature and reason, is order and love, has commissioned men of a private character, with a lawful power, on every pretence of some public mismanagement, to inflame and raise the multitude [read *mob*], embroil the state, and overturn the foundations of public peace.”<sup>65</sup> The force of his hortatory came down in “a most serious and solemn warning against lawless rebellion, anarchy and confusion.”<sup>66</sup> In America’s young republic, Goodrich was most concerned with the benefits of peace and order, not the dangers of tyranny and oppression.

As was common in the era, Goodrich invoked the example of Rome and its classical republican virtues to reinforce his call for righteous rulers. “It is essentially necessary in all good governments,” he asserted, “but especially the life and spirit of a happy, free and republican state, which subsists on the virtues of its citizens, and can never, while any sound wisdom is left to direct the public choice, by design commit the civil administration into the hands of men destitute of political abilities, or who are the patrons of vice.”<sup>67</sup> After the importance of selecting wise and righteous rulers, however, Goodrich turned immediately to an emphasis on submissive citizens, stating that “The next thing is to discover a deference and submission to authority, obedience to the laws, a spirit of righteousness and peace, and a disposition to promote the public

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 21.

good.”<sup>68</sup> He returned to this emphasis throughout the sermon. Upon the foundation of a virtuous republican state, Goodrich concluded, “If any real or supposed grievances should arise in a republic, they may be examined and redressed, without having recourse to arms, and opposing the government of the people, in the hands of the constitutional authority of the state.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, he left no doubt as to his opinion of the methods chosen by Shays’ rebels to redress supposed abuses of governmental power in Massachusetts.

As noted above, Goodrich recognized the power of reason to support his argument, yet he appealed to Romans 13 as the chief basis for his promotion of submission—almost regardless of one’s political differences with those in power. He used the example of the Apostle Paul, whom he described as “inspired with the benevolence of the gospel” and “the slave of no party,” as a rebuke to those who would do otherwise. “The doctrine [Paul] delivered,” he claimed, “was not the effect of servile flattery and shameful cowardice . . . [but] is so expressed as at once to declare the great end of civil government, the duty of the magistrate, and the reasonableness of the subjects obedience.”<sup>70</sup> In keeping with the language of Romans 13:3-4, Goodrich called for government to praise good behavior and punish evil behavior. Yet, it is significant to note that although Goodrich believed evil-doers could be effectively “restrained by the dread of punishment,” he did not hold the same degree of confidence that good government could effectively encourage citizens to behave virtuously. Rather, reflecting his evangelical emphasis

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 52. Goodrich also concluded, in apparent acknowledgment of the government’s successful resolution of the Shays’ crisis, “I cannot my Fellow-Citizens but flatter myself, that the necessity of the times has begun to work for its own relief, in a way conducive to the public good, and the virtue and peace of the people.” Ibid., 56. He went on to unite business (mercantile) and farming (agricultural) interests in his praise of American industry.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 23.

on internal regeneration by God through faith in Christ, he maintained that virtuous citizens “are influenced to do well out of reverence to God, and sincere love to mankind.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, his anxieties over the breakdown of peaceful community were followed by an appeal to the power of the Christian gospel to create virtuous citizens when mere “excellent precepts of morality” do not avail to change behavior. According to Goodrich, not only does the gospel provide the believer with salvation and elevated, eternal concerns, but “it binds us to the most unremitting diligence and perseverance in all good works, by the solemn account we must give to our righteous judge, for all the deeds done in the body.”<sup>72</sup>

Goodrich’s 1787 election sermon gave every indication that the parson had reflected seriously on the events in Massachusetts and had growing concern about their implications for the stability of the union of States under the Articles of Confederation. Using the “public good” as an objective value by which to evaluate individual or group behavior in a republic, Goodrich’s message resonated with the claim of Romans 13:4 that government’s purpose is to be “the minister of God to thee for good,” which had been emphasized by revolutionary era evangelicals in critique of British rule and as an excuse for resistance. Only in this case, the Connecticut Congregationalist applied it as a critique of those who would challenge elected authorities with “private” and, thus, impure motive. “I think it my duty on this solemn occasion,” he cautioned, “to warn my fellow citizens, against all such vile and wicked practices, which tend to the ruin of magistracy, and the destruction of peace and order.”<sup>73</sup> It was evident that Shays’ Rebellion had caused this minister’s concerns to shift from the dangers of an ill-disciplined state to those of an

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 14, 15.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 26. His comments allude to the Apostle Paul’s teaching in II Corinthians 5:10 concerning a future judgment of believers in Christ.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 51.

ill-disciplined public. Moreover, he frequently stressed in his sermon that the “public good” encompassed the nation rather than that of any one state. His emphasis pointed to a developing urgency felt by many for a new basis of national union, an urgency that would produce the U.S. Constitution two years later.<sup>74</sup>

But, Backus and Goodrich also offered revealing comments about their hopes and expectations with regard to the development of the United States. Backus opened his rebuke of the rebels with the following:

Our fathers came to this land for purity and liberty in the worship of God; but now many have drawn their swords against each other, about the affairs of worldly gain, whereby an exceeding dark cloud is brought over us. Instead of being the light of the world, and the pillar and ground of the truth, as those are that obey Him who is the fountain of *light* and *love*; what a stumbling-block are we to other nations, who have their eyes fixed upon us?<sup>75</sup>

Evaluating the rebellion by his evangelical vision for an America that would represent Christian truth in the world, Backus condemned Shays’ rebels as having erected an obstacle to the realization of a Christian America. His argument was remarkable, considering his lifelong advocacy for disestablishment at the state level and separation of Church and state at the federal level. In effect, Backus equated America with the church by using two New Testament phrases, “the light of the world” and “the pillar and ground of the truth,” to describe his hopes for the nation.<sup>76</sup> The first was spoken by Jesus regarding His followers and, in a manner Backus opposed, by Congregationalist descendants of the Puritans in Massachusetts who made famous in an American context the next phrase in the verse, “A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>75</sup> Backus, *Address to the Inhabitants of New-England*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Matthew 5:14 and I Timothy 3:15, respectively.

The second phrase was written by the Apostle Paul in defining the fundamental purpose of the church in the world. It would be more expected that Backus' Baptist convictions would have emphasized the uniqueness of the church and the testimony of believers in this regard, rather than adapting his language so closely to that of defenders of the established churches New England. Likewise, Goodrich expressed his hope that the proclamation of the gospel might bring about a truly Christian nation in America. He saw the blessings of the gospel as *potential* rather than *present* in the current stage of American life. And, he argued that submission to civil authority provided the most fertile ground in which a Christian nation might grow.<sup>78</sup> Thus, one reasonably concludes in the case of both Backus and Goodrich that their reassessment of the meaning of the command to submit to civil authorities—now that those authorities were no longer British but American—was strongly tied to their hopes that America would become a truly Christian nation.<sup>79</sup>

### **Federal Constitution**

As the dispute in Massachusetts was being resolved, a national debate was heating up, one which led similarly competing American interests toward collision. Only this time a Federal Constitution would be the focal point of argument. Those who had lost the battle in Massachusetts (literally and conceptually) believed that there was clear correlation between their grievances against the state constitution and agrarian values threatened by a new federal

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<sup>77</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975, 2011), 91-92.

<sup>78</sup> Goodrich, *Principles of Civil Union and Happiness*, 26.

<sup>79</sup> This conclusion is further supported by comments in a letter from Backus to then President George Washington on November 15, 1790 (three years after his *Address to the Inhabitants of New-England* quoted above). In the context of questions about taxes, he wished the President well, hoping “That your Excellency may still be guided and preserved in your exalted and difficult station *until righteous government be established in this land.*” Alvah Hovey, ed., *A Memoir of the Life and Times of the Rev. Isaac Backus, A.M.* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1858), 250. Emphasis mine.

constitution. “Other Shaysites,” Szatmary points out, “decided to oppose the proposed national constitution which they perceived as favorable to the commercial interest and detrimental to the small farmer.” He quotes Henry Knox, who concluded that “in Massachusetts the property, the ability and the virtue of the State, are almost solely in favor of the [U.S.] Constitution. Opposed to it are the late insurgents, and all those who abetted their designs, constituting four-fifths of the opposition.”<sup>80</sup> Knox’s assessment proved accurate, for ongoing dissatisfaction in western Massachusetts resulted in delegates to the state convention of 1788 from that region voting heavily against ratification.<sup>81</sup>

Although the passage and ratification of the American Constitution did not in and of itself precipitate serious or widespread acts of rebellion against the government of the United States, it did mark significant debate over appropriate limits of federal authority. In his thorough analysis of American politics in the last decade of the eighteenth century, historian James Roger Sharp asserts that “The greatest single problem facing the new government was to establish its legitimacy as the national authority.”<sup>82</sup> This was clearly evident to those who struggled to solve pressing political, social and economic problems with the revised framework of government. In a letter written more than a year after New Hampshire became the ninth and final necessary state to ratify the Constitution, its tireless champion, James Madison, confided to a friend that he still could only hope that the document would eventually put an end “to this disaffection to the

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<sup>80</sup> Kaufman, *Shays’ Rebellion*, 21.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. cf. 16.

<sup>82</sup> Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 18. “The crisis-induced unity of the Revolution and the imperfect union of the Articles of Confederation had not resulted in an effective national authority. Because of American suspicions toward government in general, but particularly toward government beyond the local or state level, the Articles had not required the yielding of state sovereignty. Now, with the ratification of the Constitution, Americans were attempting to take a giant step in the long, complicated, and agonizing process of creating a national community.” Ibid., 19.



Gov't.”<sup>83</sup> So, even when George Washington stood for his first inauguration in 1789, Sharp rightly concludes that there was limited confidence in the Constitution’s ability to shape the “heterogeneous and scattered population” of America into a unified and durable republic.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the contentious debates surrounding the Constitution’s passage and ratification laid groundwork for the first American political party system, which many at the time believed would be the downfall of American unity. Sharp argues that the Constitution’s unifying effect upon the states was yet future at the beginning of the 1790s because “the newness of the Constitution, the widespread sense of its fragility, and the bitter antagonism between the contending groups in American society prevented that document from providing limits to the political debate and serving as the consensual touchstone for the nation.”<sup>85</sup> Evangelical Christians, too, might on rare occasions express conflicted feelings regarding the direction of the country under a new governmental structure. But, in the face of fracturing opinions about the form that the union of states should take, and with recent events in western Massachusetts as a backdrop, northern evangelicals generally supported the Constitution.

Federalists sought to overcome opposition to the Constitution and assuage fears of a tyrannical national authority principally by three means. Foremost of all, they promoted George Washington as the nation’s first president. They reasoned that the respect in which he was held by most Americans would bolster the credibility of the national government. Second, Federalists worked to see that those elected to the new national Congress were supporters of the Constitution. This would prevent a legislative reversal of gains made in the central authority of

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<sup>83</sup> James Madison to Richard Peters, 19 August 1789, Madison Papers, National Archives, [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution\\_history.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_history.html) (accessed January 16, 2017). See also, Sharp, *American Politics*, 28.

<sup>84</sup> Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 18.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

the United States. Finally, they promoted swift passage of a bill of rights in amendment to the Constitution, upstaging opponents who had already successfully used its absence as a weapon against the document. Although not a product of Federalist strategy, most evangelicals applied the language of submission in Romans 13 and other New Testament passages to inspire popular acceptance of national authority and give religious justification for countering resistance to the new civil structure of American government.<sup>86</sup>

John Leland (1754-1841) had been raised as a Congregationalist in Massachusetts, but experienced evangelical conversion under the preaching of Baptist Wait Palmer and was baptized at age eighteen. He entered the ministry and after fourteen years pastoring small Baptist churches in Virginia, returned to Massachusetts for the long remainder of his life and ministry.<sup>87</sup> Under his pseudonym, Jack Nips, he published a pamphlet in 1794 titled *The Yankee Spy*, in which he argued for separation of church and state. Using the long-honored Christian tradition of catechetical form, he posed questions of religious and political significance to the Early Republic and used their answers to make his case. At one point, he asked, “What have you to say about the Federal Constitution of America?” Due to Leland’s prominence as a leading Separate Baptist in New England, his direct inquiry and answer provides insight as to how northern evangelical Christians—at least the non-conforming ones—reacted to the document in the first five years of its existence. The reply was favorable:

It is a novelty in the world; partly confederate, and partly consolidate—partly directly elective, and partly elective one or two removes from the people; but one of the greatest excellencies of the Constitution is, that no religious test is ever to be required to qualify any officer in any part of the government. To say that the Constitution is perfect, would

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<sup>86</sup> I rely here upon the analysis of Richard Beeman, *Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2009, 2010), 373-385, and Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 26-28.

<sup>87</sup> Reid et al., eds., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 642-643.

be too high an encomium upon the fallibility of the framers of it; yet this may be said, that it is the best national machine that is now in existence.<sup>88</sup>

For a Massachusetts Baptist, still battling the prejudice and opposition of an established state church, the Constitution's separation of church and state was welcomed indeed. During the intervening years between ratification and Leland's summary approval, other northern evangelicals of many varieties came to similar conclusions, though in some cases minus the approbation of disestablishment.

Massachusetts Congregationalist Daniel Foster (1750?-1795) graduated from Dartmouth College in 1777. Dartmouth had been founded eight years earlier by the well-known Congregational revivalist and promoter of Native American missions, Eleazar Wheelock (1711-1779). Foster's emphasis on the indispensability of Christ's shed blood to reconcile God and humanity as well as his reliance on biblical revelation point to his evangelical disposition. He argued from the text of Romans 13 for the necessity of civil government in consequence of humanity's sinful nature, a doctrine stressed by evangelical Calvinists in order to assert the need of individual conversion. His 1790 *Election Sermon* was preached before Revolution era notables, including John Hancock and Samuel Adams.<sup>89</sup> While he maintained that the obedience of subjects should not be limited by the mode of government, he nevertheless preferred

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<sup>88</sup> John Leland, "The Yankee Spy," in L. F. Greene, *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland: including some events in his life* (New York: G.W. Wood, 1845, repr. ed. 1969), 219.

<sup>89</sup> Daniel Foster, *A Sermon Preached before His Excellency John Hancock, Esq. Governour; His Honor Samuel Adams, Esq. Lieutenant-governour; the Honourable the Council, Senate, and House of Representatives, of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, May 26, 1790. Being the day of general election, by Daniel Foster, A.M. Pastor of the church in New Braintree* (Boston: Thomas Adams, 1790), 8, 35, Early American Imprints, Series 1, no. 22506, [http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=0F3018D88A605F40&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F3018D88A605F40&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed July 17, 2014). Foster's paean to America as a direct work of God to bring in Christ's Kingdom yielded to excessive praise of the civil magistrates in attendance. His enthusiasm for their dignity seems to have led him to imply—contrary to evangelical theology—that, in their case, perhaps human merit contributed to salvation. His flattery continued for four published pages. See pp.28ff.

republican over monarchical government as more biblical.<sup>90</sup> He delicately interlaced republican and biblical principles to support civil authorities in Massachusetts and the nation. According to Foster, “The Magistrate, then, called to office by the voice of the people, and solemnly sworn, becomes an ordinance of GOD, and receives his authority from him, ‘by whom Princes rule, and Nobles, even all the Judges of the earth.’”<sup>91</sup> But, Foster found his firmest support for state and national authority in Romans 13. “It is the duty of christian [*sic*] rulers,” he declared, “to preserve and secure to the people, their liberties and properties. The end and design of civil government is to secure the happiness of the whole community. For this, rulers are appointed; ‘he is the Minister of GOD to thee *for good*.’”<sup>92</sup> Citing or quoting the passage multiple times, he both validated previous America’s revolt against Great Britain and called for obedience to the U.S. Constitution. “We have been led [by God],” he stated, “to frame and adopt a constitution of government that is the wonder of the world; resembling that which God of old, gave the Israelites, the seed of Abraham his friend.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, he insisted, “It becomes rulers, ministers and people, to be willing subjects of this kingdom, that they may be the glory of Christ its King.”<sup>94</sup> Using Romans 13:4, the minister emphasized the duty of magistrates to serve for the good of the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 8-9, 18.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 10. The biblical reference is to Proverbs 8:16.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 13-14. “Good” in the text of Romans 13:4 was often viewed by evangelical Christians of the Early Republic through the lens of Lockean liberalism or its terminology, at least.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 24 cf. 23. Two observations are worth making here. First, late-eighteenth-century Americans were typically more familiar with and concerned about their State constitutions than contemporary Americans. It is sometimes difficult to determine whether an author’s reference to a political constitution was meant to pertain to his State’s or the Federal Constitution. In this case, I have judged from the context that Foster’s accolade was intended for the recently ratified Constitution of the United States. Second, Foster’s use of Old Testament analogy demonstrated that he argued from a theologically postmillennial position, viewing America as the fulfillment of the kingdom of Messiah (Christ).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 25 cf. 18, 33.

community, but he gave no justification for Americans to suppose that they had any cause to resist the constitutional authority of government in the Early Republic.

In his election sermon the next year, New Hampshire Presbyterian minister Israel Evans (1747-1807) sought to validate constitutional government by using biblical principles to balance the responsibilities of magistrates and people. “Should [civil rulers],” he asked, “not be *ministers of God for good* to the people, in every possible way?” From this reference to Romans 13:4, used commonly twenty-five years earlier to condemn the authority of England over the Colonies, Evans went on to imagine an America in which “obedience will be a pleasing duty” for citizens. The key to this happy conclusion, he supposed, would come when “the true spirit of religion” and a “generous spirit of liberty” combined to stir Christians to obey New Testament commands to “*render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s*” and to “*Submit . . . to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake.*”<sup>95</sup> For Evans, “the true spirit of religion” was generated by personal conversion through faith in Christ. He represented continuing northern evangelical hopes that America would become a Christian nation, and he connected positive political outcomes under the government of the Constitution with a nation whose identity would be primarily defined in religious terms.

Congregational minister Timothy Stone of Lebanon, Connecticut agreed in his 1792 election sermon. “Viewing yourselves, in the light of truth, as the ministers of GOD, to this people for good,” he reminded those present, “you will realize the important connection between the moral government of Jehovah, and those inferior governments which he hath ordained to

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<sup>95</sup> Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons*, vol. 1, 1070-1071. Evans quoted Jesus from the New Testament Gospels and the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 2:13). Italics in original.

exist among men.”<sup>96</sup> He went on to exhort personal, moral devotion to the Christian religion as an example for those over whom they ruled. “Let us not vainly boast,” he implored, “in our truly happy constitution—nor in the number of wise, and pious personages, whom God hath called to preside in its administration.” There was good reason to do so, he claimed, but “we must be a religious, holy people. . . . Let all be exhorted, to become wise to salvation, through faith, which is in CHRIST JESUS.—AMEN.”<sup>97</sup> Pronouncing what he considered to be a blessing on the newly elected Connecticut governor, Stone expressed the hope that not every aspect of the state’s rightful duty under biblical authority might need to be exercised. In particular, he referenced the latter part of Romans 13:4 and urged that the governor might take care “never to bear that sword in vain, which the exalted MEDIATOR, through the instrumentality of men, hath put into your hand.”<sup>98</sup> Again envisioning the happy effects of Christianity on the young nation, he felt it his duty “to exhort all the disciples of Jesus, that they ‘submit themselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake. . . . For this is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.’”<sup>99</sup> New Hampshire Presbyterian minister William Morison (1748-1818) expressed the same opinion in his election sermon that year, using Romans 13 to underscore the imperative of submission. “Thus,” he summarized the Apostle Paul’s meaning, “though civil government be a natural ordinance, it is also of divine appointment: therefore subjection to it, is enjoined, not only ‘for wrath,’ or fear of punishment; but from christian [*sic*]

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<sup>96</sup> Timothy Stone, “Election Sermon,” 10 May 1792, in Hyneman & Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing*, vol. 2, 855. Stone’s remarks to the Governor and Assembly of Connecticut also reveal his evangelical views beginning on p. 857.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 857. Stone’s comment alluded to Second Timothy 3:15.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 853.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 856. Stone’s quotation of First Peter 2:13-15 served to corroborate the normative application of the Apostle Paul’s command in Romans 13:1 (quoted on the previous page of his work).

motives, and ‘for conscience sake.’”<sup>100</sup> And he admonished, “My friends and fellow citizens, since the establishment of a free government does us honor, let us never do dishonor to ourselves, by disobeying its legal and constitutional commands.”<sup>101</sup> His comments were consciously aimed at support for the U.S. Constitution.

Evangelical support of national authority under the Constitution did not come without occasional struggle over constitutional principles that conflicted with cherished—and sometimes radical—political values. Herman Husband (1724-1795) was raised an Anglican in Virginia until the preaching of George Whitefield drew him to confess evangelical faith. He turned to New Light Presbyterianism and eventually became a Quaker, spending a good portion of his adulthood in untamed western Pennsylvania, in part hiding from authorities, until his death. Those who met him often questioned his sanity, but not his intelligence, and he proved himself to be disciplined and stable enough to raise a family and manage his affairs in harsh frontier conditions. In religion, he was given to sensational interpretations of biblical prophecies. In politics, he gravitated toward radical reforms in monetary policy and voting rights.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> William Morison, *A Sermon, Delivered at Dover, State of Newhampshire [sic]; before the Honorable General Court, at the annual election, June 7th, 1792. By William Morison, Minister of a Presbyterian church, Londonderry* (Exeter: Henry Ranlet, 1792), 7, Eighteenth Century Collections, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T001&docId=CB129547737&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> (accessed January 12, 2015). See also page 37 where Morison used Romans 13:7 to encourage Americans to pay taxes without complaint.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 33 cf. 11-13. See also, Daniel Dana, *Sermon Delivered March 12, 1818, at the funeral of the Rev. William Morrison [Morison] D.D., pastor of the Presbyterian church in the west parish of Londonderry* (Newburyport: William Hastings, 1818), 19, Early American Imprints, Series 2, no. 43804, [http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=104405A372B37A18&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=104405A372B37A18&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed January 13, 2015). Fellow Presbyterian Daniel Dana described the long-serving minister’s sermons as “purely and strictly evangelical.”

<sup>102</sup> William Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Frontier Rebels Who Challenged America’s Newfound Sovereignty* (New York: A Lisa Drew Book, Scribner, 2006), 25-26 cf. 71-95, 259-261.

Husband published a pamphlet in 1789 under the pseudonym, Lycurgus III. Written from western Pennsylvania in connection with the ratification of the Constitution, but before the Bill of Rights was settled, the “sermon” expressed both support and dissatisfaction with the document. In complex and rambling prose, the author adapted Old and New Testament prophecies to a cosmic struggle between liberty and tyranny, and argued that the founding of United States represented prophetic fulfillment.<sup>103</sup> He contended that in good government, such as that found under the new Constitution, “all the good people will praise it; as the apostle [Paul] said, ‘A praise to them that do well.’”<sup>104</sup> Yet, he complained bitterly that—despite the just provisions of the Federal Constitution—in Pennsylvania, both land and public resources were “extravagantly given away to private favourites” and mismanaged for the benefit of mercantile interests.<sup>105</sup> When he turned to criticism, Husband’s language could be construed as instigating rebellion, and it was this reputation that would later place him on a wanted list by Pennsylvania authorities during the Whiskey Rebellion.<sup>106</sup> His intentions were probably more complicated, however. Although he spoke threateningly of the role of “citizen militias” in resisting overbearing civil authorities, Husband seemed to distance himself from direct armed rebellion. “At length, however,” he wrote, “a more peaceable way has taken place, to try our strength by a

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<sup>103</sup> Lycurgus III [Heman Husband], *XIV Sermons on the Characters of Jacob’s Fourteen Sons* (Philadelphia: William Spotswood, 1789), iii-iv, Early American Imprints, Series I, no. 45478, [http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=0F2F82554E61B788&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F2F82554E61B788&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed September 15, 2014). Husband used prophetic passages from the Old and New Testaments as allegories for particular forms and structures of “ideal” government. His interpretations of Daniel 7, Mark 14 and other biblical passages in Ezekiel and Revelation were highly unconventional and referenced “plates” that contained schematics for his political designs and apparently accompanied the original publication.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 14. Husband’s biblical quotation was adapted from Romans 13:3.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>106</sup> Hogeland, *Whiskey Rebellion*, 217.



majority of voices, and elect all our rulers by the voice of the people: so that the body of freemen, who ought to vote, are the same as the militia.” Thus, “by those civil weapons” and “those peaceable means” the citizens will overcome tyranny at the ballot box.<sup>107</sup> However one interprets his warnings of civil authorities, it is clear that as of 1789, Husband feared “a falling away again of these united states” and the return of tyranny under the new Constitution, unless a bill of rights passed to prevent it.<sup>108</sup> Husband’s sermon, though not typical of the style of most northern evangelicals, nonetheless showed that some had serious misgivings about the consequences for average citizens of vesting too much authority in a central government—whether at the state or national level. But in the end, most northern evangelical voices spoke as one, calling American Christians to “be subject unto the higher powers,” embodied in the Constitutional authority United States.

### **The Whiskey Rebellion**

Serious challenges to federal authority in the Early Republic continued to crop up in the final decade of the eighteenth century, even before Washington completed his second term as president. The most prominent has come down through history as “The Whiskey Rebellion” (1794-1795).<sup>109</sup> Though not unreasonably descriptive, the epithet better represented the perspective of eastern creditors and speculators than small agricultural interests west of the Appalachian Mountains. The roots of the Whiskey Rebellion were planted in the fiscal policy of Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury (1789-1795).

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<sup>107</sup> Lycurgus III, *XIV Sermons*, 21-22.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, iv.

<sup>109</sup> Agitation over a domestic excise (tax) proposed by Congress began in the western counties of Pennsylvania as early as 1791, but conflict came to a head in 1794 and had failed by the end of 1795.

In the last month of 1790, Hamilton sent Congress the second installment of his plan to repay federal debt and set the nation on a sound economic footing. Two elements composed this phase of his plan. First, Hamilton laid before the legislators his conception of a National Bank. The Bank represented the central component of his fiscal plan for the nation, but it met with considerable opposition in and outside of Congress. Many southern representatives, led by James Madison of Virginia, believed that Hamilton's plan did harm to the Constitution, a document Madison had collaborated with Hamilton and John Jay to promote in *The Federalist Papers* (1788). In this case, however, Madison agreed with his southern colleagues that the Bank represented an unconstitutional expansion of central authority by the federal government.<sup>110</sup> Sharp emphasizes the sectional divide highlighted by this debate, as indicated by the fact that northern Representatives overwhelmingly voted in favor of the Bank, southern Representatives voted almost as consistently against the Bank.<sup>111</sup> Chapter six of this essay will argue that support for expanding central authority by northern evangelicals undercut southern opposition on religious-political grounds to "unconstitutional" exercises of federal power, thus blunting the effectiveness of moral rhetoric from southern politicians in future debates.<sup>112</sup> This sectional dynamic in constitutional interpretation would prove central to the question of submission to civil authority in the nineteenth century, but in the late-eighteenth century, an east-west socio-economic divide prompted the only violent reaction to fiscal policy.

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<sup>110</sup> Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 38-39. Madison served as Representative from the Virginia's 5<sup>th</sup> District from 1789-1793, and authored the first ten amendments to the Constitution, commonly called the Bill of Rights, to protect individual rights under central government. See also, Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788-1828* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 174-191.

<sup>111</sup> Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 39 cf. 92ff.

<sup>112</sup> By supporting the biblical legitimacy of the central government, northern evangelicals would later contribute to a general perception in the North that nineteenth-century southern evangelical critics of federal authority were controlled by sectional self-interest, rather than by religious convictions.

Coupled with the first element of his proposal, Hamilton advanced an excise on domestically distilled liquors to raise funds for retiring the federal debt. Compared to the opposition raised by the National Bank proposal, the “whiskey tax” (as it was commonly called) raised few concerns in Congress. But it provoked a violent backlash in the west, where distilling grain represented at the time virtually the only chance for yeoman farmers to escape individual debt burdens and make profit. In his eminently readable 2006 book on the subject, journalist and popular historian, William Hogeland, helpfully assesses and reduces the complex causes of the conflict to a struggle between creditors and debtors, but one which had profound implications for the American political process.<sup>113</sup> The magnitude of the perceived threat it posed to civil authority can be gauged by various measures. Talk of tyranny, secession, rebellion and savagery abounded. For a time, federal agents sent to the wilds of Pennsylvania to assure compliance with the tax law were humiliatingly stripped naked, beaten, tarred and feathered or killed. Influential financiers worried openly about the economic viability of the United States—not to mention their own fiscal health—should Congress not find a way to repay war debts in sound currency. Perhaps most strikingly, President Washington determined the crisis merited raising a 13,000-man national army, which he personally led west to confront the rebellious citizens and restore peace and order. Moving beyond the actual and potential violence precipitated by the revolt on the frontier, Sharp astutely places the Whiskey Rebellion alongside Kentucky secession plans and the Democratic-Republican societies of the 1790s to reveal a broader context of argument regarding appropriate boundaries of political opposition in the Early Republic. “And although armed resistance to the will of the majority was denounced by most political leaders,” he states,

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<sup>113</sup> Hogeland, *Whiskey Rebellion*, 33-34.

“there was an effort to define the legitimate limits of opposition in the United States and to explore suitable institutional means for expressing this opposition.”<sup>114</sup>

In keeping with their habit during the first two decades of American independence, northern evangelicals contributed to this debate concerning legitimate limits and means of opposition to republican government. But for the first time since the Revolution, they demonstrated less than consistent support for the political order. Moreover, their differences fell along geographical and socio-economic lines. Evangelical ministers east of the Appalachians condemned the wanton cruelty and vice of what they deemed surely to be unconverted frontier Americans. But, revealingly, except for overall moral condemnations of avarice and self-indulgence—hardly novel in the late-eighteenth century—northeastern evangelicals had little to say in critique of the moneyed eastern interests who either underestimated or scorned the financial hardships suffered by western farmers during and since the Revolution. It is more difficult to ascertain the opinions of evangelical Christians who lived west of the mountains, but limited documentary evidence suggests that evangelicals on the frontier were sympathetic to the socio-economic plight of backcountry farmers, critical of the nation’s new economic policy, and supportive of resistance. This may be reflected in Hogeland’s paradoxical summary of religious attitudes at the time, in which he declares, “Evangelicals opposed greed and luxury, supported paper finance, and worked for general salvation.”<sup>115</sup> From Hogeland’s little explained characterization, it is difficult to determine to whom such moral and political positions applied (creditor, debtor or government policymaker).

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<sup>114</sup> Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 93 cf. 98.

<sup>115</sup> Hogeland, *Whiskey Rebellion*, 77.

Peres Fobes (1742-1812) was a Congregational minister in Massachusetts and a graduate of Harvard whose evangelical piety led him to the College of Rhode Island (renamed Brown University in 1804), where he taught natural philosophy and served for a time as vice-president. His 1795 election sermon applied the New Testament teaching of the Apostles Peter and Paul to understand and address strains between rulers and ruled in a democratic republic. Combining elements of instruction from the second epistle of Peter and Paul's words in Romans 13:4, Fobes concluded "that speaking evil of dignitaries is a crime on the supposition only, that rulers are both the choice and ministers of good to the people."<sup>116</sup> Fobes left open the possibility of lawful resistance to oppressive magistrates, but refused to countenance its likelihood under republican government. "What is that government which cannot be spoken against," Fobes asked, "without [as Peter had declared] incurring the guilt of blasphemy, and the penalty of damnation? The answer is plain: That government, which the Apostle [Paul] calls *an ordinance of God*, is a government chosen by the people; for he [Peter] expressly calls it *the ordinance of man*."<sup>117</sup> Fobes applied the language of Romans 13:5 and claimed, "A good man will do *more* than strict justice can demand of him. . . . This will operate with peculiar force on the people as well as on rulers. This will seize the hearts. And the subject yields to the magistrate, *not for wrath, but for conscience sake*."<sup>118</sup> Understanding republican government to be the epitome of "the ordinance of man," Fobes could both acknowledge theoretically the right of revolt against civil authority and compel submission to civil authority in America based on Christian character.

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<sup>116</sup> Peres [Perez] Fobes, "[An Election Sermon]" (1795), in Hyneman and Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing*, vol. 2, 992. Fobes commented on 2 Peter 2:10.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. cf. Romans 13:2 and 1 Peter 2:13. Italics in original.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 1005-1006.

In a thorough examination of religion and politics on the frontier during the final decades of the 1700s, Peter E. Gilmore points to the fact that at least some of the leaders of protest were Presbyterian and implies that religion played a role in their opposition to federal policy as well as rhetoric used against them by proponents of federal and state fiscal policies. According to Gilmore:

Irish Presbyterians joined other rural folk as protagonists in the agrarian protests convulsing the Pennsylvania backcountry. Their spokesmen, especially William Findley and John Smilie, became leading defenders of the state's radical democratic constitution [adopted 1776] and principal opponents of the Federal Constitution. Fundamentally, this opposition derived from disadvantaged economic circumstances: the relatively vulnerable and insecure status of Scotch-Irish farmers and laborers vis-à-vis landowners, merchants and creditors created the ground for involvement in insurgency.<sup>119</sup>

While rightly depicting the varied concerns of northern evangelicals, representing at times opposing sides of the conflict, neither Hogeland nor Gilmore satisfactorily explain why evangelical Christians did not come down squarely on one side or the other in debate over government policies. Or, stated another way, why their moral compass did not orient northeastern evangelicals to have what Hogeland clearly believes would have been a proper compassion for the complaints of poor western farmers. Though obviously conflicted among themselves as to the merits of competing political and financial interests, I argue that northern evangelicals nonetheless sought what they deemed to be the best means of advancing the gospel and creating a national Christian identity. Eastern evangelicals were more invested in the established socio-economic structure, so they favored peace and order. Evangelicals on the western frontier were more sympathetic to the socio-economic disadvantages of those negatively impacted by the whiskey tax, so they favored resistance to civil authorities. Yet, in a sense, both

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<sup>119</sup> Peter E. Gilmore, "Rebels and Revivals: Ulster Immigrants, Western Pennsylvania Presbyterianism and the Formation of Scotch-Irish Identity, 1780–1830" (PhD diss., Carnegie Mellon University, 2009), 387-388 cf. 422, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, <http://search.proquest.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/docview/304865032?accountid=11789> (accessed January 11, 2017). His use of the descriptor, "Scotch-Irish," would be more accurately rendered "Scots-Irish."

positions revealed a reawakening of concern for spiritual rather than political goals. This recognition helps explain Hogeland's paradoxical, yet largely accurate characterization of evangelical Christian concerns during the crisis. Working for "general salvation"—that is, of both parties concerned—certainly did not represent a new concern for evangelical Christians. But, intentionally or not, Hogeland points toward a reawakening of attention to the spiritual realm rather than the political realm, which had already begun among northern evangelicals in the maturing and expanding American nation.

### **Conclusion**

Northern evangelical support for the fledgling government of the United States followed in the train of that religious group's endorsement of the American Revolution. This fact should be little surprising, given the level of enthusiasm most had shown for independence from Great Britain by the time hostilities erupted in 1775. What may be surprising, and yet a close reading of their pulpit literature demonstrates, is that the evangelical commitment to biblical authority compelled them to utilize the same New Testament passages to buttress civil authority in the Early Republic as had been employed to justify revolt against British authority in the American Colonies only a few years earlier. Most prominent among the scriptures employed was the Apostle Paul's command in Romans 13:1 to "be subject unto the higher powers" and its elaboration in the verses that follow. In order to support the authority of the federal government, northern evangelicals first and most persistently, embraced republicanism as the most worthy of political forms. If this were so, they reasoned, then the civil authority under which Americans lived must certainly qualify, in the apostle's words, as "ordained of God." As a result, evangelical sermons that referred to Romans 13 during the first decades after independence displayed less emphasis on the necessity of government to fulfill its responsibility under God as

a condition for submission (Romans 13:3-4). It would be unfair and inaccurate to say that evangelicals no longer cared about the duties of civil magistrates. Their sermons continued to testify otherwise. With few exceptions, however, northern evangelical Christians gave American magistrates the benefit of doubt when their authority was challenged by disgruntled citizens.

The significance of evangelical contributions to civil order in the Early Republic should not be taken as inconsequential, for the precariousness of American unity under the Articles of Confederation and competing socio-economic interests between regions caused many to question the viability of the new and expanding nation. Sharp stresses that even after the Articles had been scrapped, “Many judged that the union and the Constitution would be lucky to survive into the nineteenth century, and the events of the 1790s only confirmed their forebodings.”<sup>120</sup> Moreover, he argues persuasively that the Constitution “did not and could not provide the institutional stability or consensus” that was needed to adjudicate between competing visions of what the nation would become.<sup>121</sup> Serious debates about the nature and application of federal authority did not dissipate entirely after the Constitution and Bill of Rights were ratified. My study suggests that biblical authority, affirmed largely through the preaching of respected evangelical ministers and their published pamphlets, helped satisfy a need for stability and consensus regarding legitimate civil authority in America that Sharp ably argues was lacking from other sources (including the Federal Constitution). Nevertheless, as the eighteenth century came to an end, there were already signposts pointing to reinvigorated evangelical interest in spiritual rather than political solutions to American problems. For, embracing the Early Republic and favoring peace and order were not ends in and of themselves for northern evangelicals. Rather, they were

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<sup>120</sup> Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 1-2.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



subordinate to the greater goal of converting sinners and building an American identity that would be chiefly defined by its character as a Protestant Christian nation. As will be shown in the next chapter, the turn of the nineteenth century brought refocused attention to that greater endeavor.

### **CHAPTER 3**

## **Jacobins and Jeffersonians: Northern Evangelicals Turn from Political to Spiritual Means, 1796–1809**

In the closing years of the eighteenth century, American evangelical Christians began to turn their attention from political to spiritual concerns.<sup>1</sup> To suggest that evangelicals previously lacked concern for the spiritual needs of their communities would be a total mischaracterization. Nor would it be fair to describe evangelical interest in American politics as dissipating entirely after 1800. But, there can be little doubt that political enthusiasm captured American evangelical attention during the Revolutionary era and continued to weigh heavily in evangelical calculations for the “Christianization” of America for the first two decades of its independence.<sup>2</sup> Biblical principles of submission to civil authority demanded considerable attention during those decades, because evangelical Americans were forced by their view of Scripture to account for any apparent discrepancy between their actions in the political realm and their convictions regarding scriptural authority. Two developments affecting civil discourse in the United States near the end of the eighteenth century changed the calculus of evangelical Christians about their involvement in politics. First, a radical turn in the course of the French Revolution during the early 1790s

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<sup>1</sup> Noll, *America’s God*, 5, 88, 131, 175-179. Note Noll’s use of formalist and anti-formalist designations for American evangelical Protestants. I prefer what I believe to be the simpler designation of establishment and non-establishment (or non-conforming) for the same categories. See also Forrest Church, *So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle over Church and State* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2007), 250-251 cf. 197-199. Church uses the social categories of “insider or outsider status” as a predictor of political opinions among early American Protestants. The vast majority of Protestant “outsiders” as Church defines them were evangelicals. Many “insiders,” however, especially in New England, would also have been evangelical Protestants.

<sup>2</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition*, The Library of American Biography (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 8-9, 11-16. According to McLoughlin, the Baptist, anti-establishment Backus referred to the American Revolution as “the new Reformation,” very similarly to how establishment Congregationalist Jedidiah Morse did at times. Backus believed that America could only become a truly Christian nation through the implementation of full religious freedom, whereas Morse defended the desirability of the state and church working together in service of the same goal. At least until the end of the eighteenth century, both points of view embraced the American Revolution (and the form of government established by it) as a means to that end.

sharpened the rhetoric in a domestic political rivalry between Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans. Both Federalists and Jeffersonian/Democratic-Republicans claimed to be the legitimate bearers of founding principles in the United States and believed the other to be a threat to constitutional authority and/or individual freedom due to cross-Atlantic influences from British monarchism (Federalists) or French radical republicanism (Republicans).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the overriding political question of the decade, according to Sharp, concerned “enduring national authority.”<sup>4</sup> Northern evangelicals still embraced the Republic and—in light of events in France—supported national authority all the more, but the violent, anti-Christian disposition of radical republicans in France gave them reason to question whether their dreams of a Christian national identity could be fulfilled in America by republican means. Second, Jeffersonian Republican committees grew in popularity during the last decade of the century and drove a political wedge between establishment evangelicals and non-establishment evangelicals that deepened the already acrimonious ecclesiastical disputes between them. Hopes for a unified evangelical political perspective crumbled just as the evangelistic and missionary fervor shared by establishment and non-establishment evangelicals began to produce widespread revivals of evangelical religion.

Beginning about 1796 and with heightened urgency to construct the westward expanding nation’s identity on the basis of evangelical Protestantism, northern evangelicals increasingly turned to religious revival as the hope of a “Christian” United States. This turn coincided with diminished expectations for the efficacy of political means to their religious objective—even under a government based on cherished and presumably biblical republican principles. Yet, those

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<sup>3</sup> Cornell, *Other Founders*, 26-34, 54, 196-197; Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers, The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 2000), 13-16.

<sup>4</sup> Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 1.

diminished expectations often resulted from conflicting political views among evangelicals that would in future decades undercut possibilities for a unified understanding of New Testament teaching regarding submission to civil authority. I argue that by the turn of the century evangelicals showed signs of disenchantment with the political process because they had not sufficiently progressed toward their goal of shaping the nation's identity to be primarily defined by evangelical Protestant Christianity. The election of Thomas Jefferson, whose religious opinions were perceived at best to be unorthodox and at worst, infidel, further undercut northern evangelical confidence in the Republic. About the same time, heightened concern for the spiritual condition of Americans captured the attention of evangelists and missionaries, producing a series of revivals and—eventually—social reform movements that promised to accomplish the higher purpose of a religious transformation of American culture from the ground up through conversion of the masses.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Although historian Nathan O. Hatch rightly summarizes what he calls “the democratization of American Christianity” during the early part of the nineteenth century as “the gravitation of common folk to forms of Christianity antagonistic to received authority,” it is nonetheless true that settled clergy continued to express commonly held religious-political opinions through their election, fast and thanksgiving sermons. Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 34. In light of the apparent contradiction between these concomitant descriptions of early-nineteenth-century American Christianity, it is useful to briefly justify here the continued use of evidence drawn from northern establishment clergy. Joseph W. Phillips, historian and biographer of evangelical Congregationalist Jedidiah Morse, has shown that during the Second Great Awakening, “Although its growth did not keep pace with that of other denominations, [evangelical Congregationalism] still had a solid hold on much of the northern middle class, making it an influential and dynamic force in American society.” Joseph W. Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse and New England Congregationalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 226. In the context of religious attitudes toward the War of 1812, historian William Gribbon correctly asserts the value of memorial sermons for discerning religious opinions. It was the clergy's prerogative on such occasions, Gribbon claims, “to outrage or delight their hearers, win notice in the local papers, perhaps even publish their sermons if public favor so warranted, all the while applying as best they could their own moral insights to a very complicated situation. The Congregationalist clergy of the northeastern states were especially adept in this procedure, perhaps because their region had so long cultivated the tradition.” William Gribbon, *The Churches Militant: The War of 1812 and American Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 24. If anything, the participation and success of many northern establishment clergy in the revivals of the nineteenth century strengthened their voice to articulate commonly debated topics of political-religious significance among evangelical Christians. According to Noll, “For the period under consideration [Edwards to Lincoln] the most widely recognized religious voices for the American public were Protestant. From the 1790s and with gathering force in the decades leading to the Civil War, the most prominent Protestant voices were also self-consciously evangelical.” Noll, *America's God*, 5; see also, E. Brooks Holifield, *God's Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007). And, already in the late-eighteenth century, establishment clergy—generally

## **Radical Republicanism in France Sharpens Political Divisions in America**

The final decade of the eighteenth century brought Americans unsettling news from Europe and growing uncertainty about the state of national authority at home. By 1799, the American public viewed the ongoing trade war with France in the Atlantic as a cause for great alarm. Some even feared, “rather fantastically,” as Sharp says, that the conflict might even lead to a French invasion of the United States. These fears were stoked by what Americans read in newspapers and pamphlets, which contained reports and rumors suggesting the possible disintegration of the Union and civil war.<sup>6</sup> In a letter to George Washington, Alexander Hamilton worried that Jefferson and his inner circle secretly wanted “to make this country a province of France.”<sup>7</sup>

Northern evangelicals watched events at home and abroad with more than casual interest. Those that favored the coupling of church and state (establishment) found those events especially disconcerting. Historian Joseph W. Phillips asserts that “The major political events of the 1790s, as the clergy perceived them through a set of political and social values to which they were deeply committed, moved them into the Federalist camp and convinced them that the Jeffersonian Republicans held out to the nation only the prospects of war and disorder.”<sup>8</sup> The increasing polarization of national politics in the 1790s divided Americans of every persuasion, not the least evangelical Christians. Sharp, a specialist in this era of United States political

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Congregational or Presbyterian—revealed growing anxiety among northern evangelicals about the prospects for continued good national government apart from spiritual revival in the nation.

<sup>6</sup> James Roger Sharp, *The Deadlocked Election of 1800: Jefferson, Burr, and the Union in the Balance*, American Presidential Elections (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2010), 63.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Susan Dunn, *Jefferson's Second Revolution: The Election Crisis of 1800 and the Triumph of Republicanism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 98-99. “A province of France?” Dunn asks incredulously, and answers, “Interesting work for the author of the Declaration of Independence.”

<sup>8</sup> Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 39.

development argues that “The new nation was on trial in the 1790s and no one knew what the verdict would be.”<sup>9</sup> He stresses that local interests (and early north-south regional divides, in particular) threatened attempts to build a national republican community. “But the question, of course,” he emphasizes, “was what kind of national community it was to be and would the new government be able to resolve fundamental conflict and to legitimize its authority.”<sup>10</sup> Northern evangelical Christians had already proven valuable allies of the federal government by reinforcing civil authority with biblical authority. But, with so much invested in the hope of constructing an enduring national Christian identity the political ordeals of the decade pressed northern evangelicals to reassess the best means to that desired end.

On the whole, northern evangelical commitment to biblically-based submission to the civil authority of the United States remained strong, but their attention began to shift from political interests to revival interests in the last years of the eighteenth century. From the late-1790s, American evangelicals reflected the broader political culture by differing among themselves as to what manner of central government best suited a Christian republic. Establishment evangelicals favored social order and strong central government (Federalism), while non-establishment evangelicals favored individual freedoms and popular oversight of government authority (Jeffersonian Republicanism).<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, despite continued hopefulness about the unique benefits of political freedom and republican government to those who wished to construct a Christian national identity, northern evangelicals expressed

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<sup>9</sup> Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>11</sup> Sharp expertly navigates and applies differing societal views on central government in his interpretation of American politics in the 1790s. “So,” he argues, “although it is true that classical republican beliefs dominated the political debate of the 1790s, it is also true that the pluralist individualism of liberal republicanism was reflected in the economic, social, and political realities of the period with its many competing interests and divisions.” *Ibid.*, 3 cf. 53-54.

diminished confidence in governmental solutions for what were perceived as the nation's spiritual needs.

Jedidiah Morse (1761–1826) would be most recognizable to twenty-first-century Americans if he were introduced to them as the father of Samuel F. B. Morse, inventor of the telegraph and namesake of the Morse code. But, in his day, the elder Morse was familiar in New England and beyond as a leading American geographer, passionate Federalist, fringe alarmist of impending threats by an illuminati conspiracy, and promoter of revivals.<sup>12</sup> According to Phillips, Morse's ministerial and scientific work alike sought to shape American "national character" in the image of republican liberty and Christian Protestantism. Thus, Phillips explains, "In 1793, in *The American Universal Geography*, [Morse] spoke of the formation of a national culture, of a time when all Americans would share 'language, manners, customs, political and religious sentiments.'"<sup>13</sup> Morse directed his creative energies as an establishment evangelical Congregational minister toward reforms in these areas, whether promoting revivals or composing moralizing declarations in his geographical studies.

Morse wrote to his father—also named Jedidiah—shortly before being ordained in 1786, expressing his fear that the upheavals of Shays' Rebellion would spread from Massachusetts to their home in Woodstock, Connecticut. "With this threat of mob rule in mind," Phillips reports, "he felt that it became 'the firm friend to good Government to be peculiarly active & assiduous

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<sup>12</sup> Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 25. For the theological context in which Jedidiah Morse circulated among Congregational "parties" around the turn of the nineteenth century, see Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 403-404 cf. 415.

<sup>13</sup> Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 32. "Of course," Phillips admits, "his political and religious opponents considered him a laughing stock—either a pathetic fool obsessed by unreal fears [i.e., the illuminati] or a propagandist and liar. The most accurate view of Morse is that he acted out of honestly held, if overwrought, fears which a deeply suspicious nature drove him to accept." *Ibid.*, 226.

in preserving peace.”<sup>14</sup> There was certainly no hint that their evangelical family saw validity to challenging federal authority, though they lamented its weakness under the Articles of Confederation. Nor did Morse yet suspect that republicanism might pose any threat to the goal of establishing in the United States a people of truly Christian character. On the contrary, when news of the French Revolution reached New England in 1789, most of the Congregationalist clergy celebrated. They interpreted it as evidence of the approaching “millennium” when Protestant and republican values would bless the whole earth under Christ’s rule. In less than a decade, however, “Morse and almost all the Congregational clergy no longer supported the [French] Revolution” and held serious reservations about the growing enthusiasm for Jeffersonian Republicanism in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Speaking at his church in Hallowell, Maine, in April 1799, the evangelical Congregational minister, Eliphalet Gillet (1768-1848) assessed the French Revolution as intellectually faulty from a Christian perspective. “They had, it seems,” he said, “by some Paine or Godwin who was among them, been enftuated with the visionary idea of an ‘Age of Reason,’ and of unrestrained ‘Liberty and equality.’ This so possessed their minds that they could not yield submission to the constituted authorities, even though they were of divine appointment.”<sup>16</sup> As the year 1800 came to a close, influential Massachusetts New School Congregationalist, Nathanael Emmons (1745-1840) continued to voice northern evangelical disgust with the status of religion in Europe. He argued that America had become the only place where true Christianity could still thrive, for “Atheism, deism, and every species of infidelity are

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>16</sup> Eliphalet Gillet, *A Discourse, Delivered at Hallowell, April 25th, 1799. Being the Day Appointed by the Chief Magistrate of the United States, for a National Fast* (New York: Cornelius Davis, 1799), 4, Eighteenth Century Collections, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T001&docId=CB131757925&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> (accessed November 1, 2016).



rapidly prevailing in Europe, and involving the most enlightened nations [e.g., France] in all the horrors of moral darkness.”<sup>17</sup> With regard to events in France, any number of northern evangelicals would have agreed with Gillet and Emmons at the time. With regard to Jefferson, however, many non-establishment evangelicals, as will be seen, held a favorable perspective.

Developments in France, viewed through the prism of orthodox Protestantism, transformed evangelical assessment of the French Revolution. News of the Terror (1793-1794) and executions of the French nobility merely as a consequence of their social status and former support for the monarchy horrified evangelicals. The Revolution’s bold assertion of the divinity of personified Reason and the apology of that principle contained in Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason*, which arrived in New England by 1794, assaulted evangelical confidence in the Bible as revealed truth. Evangelicals were even more distressed by the response of some Christians in America who sought to answer Paine by jettisoning fundamental tenets of orthodox Protestant theology. The concern of northern establishment evangelical ministers increasingly turned to America’s faith, heightening their awareness of spiritual needs over political principles. Phillips points out that Morse, like other evangelical Christians, was centrally concerned for the progress of the gospel, whether in America or abroad.<sup>18</sup> The news of how republican revolution in France treated the gospel deeply disturbed him. He and other Congregationalists began to associate religious and moral decline in America with the rise of Francophile Jeffersonian Republicans. Thus, it is not surprising that Morse’s 1795 sermon, *The Present Situation of Other Nations*, highlights his concerns about France just as confidence in the progress of an orderly republic in

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<sup>17</sup> Nathanael Emmons, “Sermon XI, God Never Forsakes His People,” 27 November 1800, in *The Works of Nathanael Emmons, D.D., Third Pastor of the Church in Franklin, Mass. with a Memoir of His Life*, ed. Jacob Ide, vol. 5 (1862; repr., New York: Garland, 1987), 176-177.

<sup>18</sup> Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 68.

America seemed to be shaken by the Whiskey Rebellion and rise of Jeffersonian Republican committees. When Morse wrote of his hope that “a glorious revival and prevalence of pure, unadulterated Christianity” might eventually attend freedom and peace in France, he was only expressing what was of primary importance to northern evangelicals for America as well.<sup>19</sup>

From the election of 1796 to that of 1800, northern establishment evangelicals began to express not only their concerns about the revolution’s “progress” in France, but also their concerns about the progress of Jefferson’s version of republicanism at home. Along with reassertions of the command to submit to civil authority expounded from Romans 13:1-7, one can tease out from evangelical writings the beginnings of a reluctance to trust America’s uniquely “blessed” republican government to promote a national Christian identity. Even after the hotly contested campaign in 1796 resulted in an apparent victory for deferential unity, with John Adams elected president on the Federalist ticket and Thomas Jefferson elected vice-president as a Democratic Republican, political harmony proved elusive at the national level. Shortly after his inauguration, Adams faced a trade war with France that haunted the rest of his presidency and contributed to partisan bitterness in his administration. The XYZ Affair, as Adam’s commission to France in 1797 became known, provides further evidence for increasing American animosity toward the former Revolutionary era ally. In the closing years of the century, it became dangerous to exhibit anything that smacked of sympathies for the French. Style-conscious Americans, who had formerly dressed in pro-French colors in Morristown, New Jersey and Boston, Massachusetts, reverted to the black cockade originally worn by veterans of the American Revolution. According to Sharp, the black cockade became symbolic of “patriotic support for Adams, the Federalists, and what was perceived to be the beleaguered country

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<sup>19</sup> Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 52-53.

[U.S.].”<sup>20</sup> Federalists increasingly portrayed Jeffersonian Republicans as unpatriotic if not disloyal and potentially conspiratorial in favor of France. Sharp offers crucial insight to the prevailing cross-Atlantic and domestic political currents that initiated a crisis of authority in America:

The election of 1796 took place in the aftermath of the acrimonious debate over the Jay Treaty—not to mention the aftermath of the most violent phase of the French Revolution with its terror and anarchy, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the uproar surrounding the Democratic-Republican societies. So, it was in a highly charged atmosphere that Americans learned of Washington’s plans to step down and of the possible candidates to replace him. The president’s decision did, in the minds of most public men, put the federal government and the Constitution in a vulnerable position.<sup>21</sup>

While Sharp does not single out clergy responses to the political turmoil of the time, they certainly were among the “public men” who recognized the vulnerable condition of national government in the United States. It is appropriate, therefore, to read evangelical sermons of this period that address submission to civil authority in light of the perceived national crisis.

Congregational minister Jonathan French (1740-1809) was among those evangelicals who took opportunity on Election Day in Massachusetts in 1796 to reiterate Christian responsibilities to civil authority in an uncertain political climate. The principle text of French’s sermon was Romans 13:5 (“Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake”), but he began with an overview of the main command to “be subject to the higher powers” (13:1). Concerning this command, he professed, “The meaning undoubtedly is, that civil government, through the instrumentality of men, was instituted by the providence of GOD, for the benefit of mankind. . . . To *such a government*, well administered, christianity

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<sup>20</sup> Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 39 cf. 63, 163.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

requires peaceable and quiet subjection . . . .”<sup>22</sup> But what constituted “such” government as must be obeyed? This continued to be a question of grave concern for evangelical interpreters.<sup>23</sup> In answer, French’s list includes promoting “private and public peace and happiness,” as well as “discountenancing [opposing] vice,” and “encouraging virtue and religion.”<sup>24</sup> The requirements followed in a tradition of American clerical tropes over the previous thirty years, except that French chose to emphasize the third characteristic of any government worth obeying (encouraging virtue and religion). His emphasis revealed amplified attention to spiritual concerns on a national level.

In contrast to northern clergy during the first decades of America’s independence, French was among a growing number of establishment evangelicals near the turn of the century who refused to distinguish republicanism as uniquely deserving of Christian submission (perhaps in part because, having secured the American Republic, they didn’t feel the need to attack other forms). Instead, he declared, “The apostle [Paul] does not prescribe any particular form of government: this is left to the wisdom and discretion of men; with which Christianity never intermeddles.”<sup>25</sup> It was not as though these late-eighteenth-century public men had ceased to

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<sup>22</sup> Jonathan French, *A Sermon Preached before His Excellency Samuel Adams, Esq. Governour; His Honor Moses Gill, Esq. Lieutenant-Governour; the Honourable the Council, Senate, and House of Representatives, of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, May 25, 1796* (Boston: Adams and Larkin, 1796), 5-6, Eighteenth Century Collections, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T001&docId=CW120704873&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> (accessed April 15, 2015). Capitalization retained from original. Emphasis mine.

<sup>23</sup> Nathanael Emmons, “A Discourse Delivered on the National Fast” (1799), in Hyneman and Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing*, vol.2, 1024. In his 1799 fast day sermon, Nathanael Emmons commented on the importance and challenge of answering this question: “But the question before us is, who are to be understood by civil rulers, to whom submission is due[?] This seems to be a plain question, though it has been much agitated by the greatest statesmen and divines.”

<sup>24</sup> French, *Sermon Preached before His Excellency Samuel Adams* (1796), 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

prefer republican government, but their analyses of biblical texts like Romans 13 showed the tempering of enthusiasm for the glories of republicanism that had come from observing the French Revolution. Moreover, a peaceful and stable government—regardless of its form—created a proper setting for the proclamation of the gospel. Like French, Emmons taught on the subject at a time when stability in government ranked as more valuable to evangelicals than resistance to authority, so he returned to the Apostle Paul’s emphasis on the importance of not stirring conflict with one’s rulers. He went considerably further than French in assessing the proper Christian attitude to various forms of government. In one of the fullest expositions of Romans 13 extant from the period, Emmons defined “the powers that be” as “those who are in peaceable possession of civil authority,” regardless of the manner in which that authority was attained.<sup>26</sup> Emmons proposed three ways by which men come to possess civil power: free and fair election of the people, hereditary right, and usurpation of previous legitimate authorities. Of these, Emmons considered the first two acceptable in God’s sight, though the first he deemed best (republicanism). His comments about the third category reveal the extent to which northern evangelicals had become willing to advocate stability in civil authority. “Though the conduct of usurpers is to be condemned and detested,” he argued, “yet after the people have, through fear or feebleness, acknowledged their supremacy, they are to all intents and purposes civil rulers, to whom obedience and subjection belong.”<sup>27</sup> He based this contention on the solid exegetical application of historical context of the New Testament exhortations. “For it is well known,” he pointed out, “that many of the primitive [i.e., first- and second-century] Christians lived under

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<sup>26</sup> Hyneman and Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing*, vol.2, 1024-25.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1025.

the government of usurpers.”<sup>28</sup> The net effect of French’s and Emmons’ teaching on the matter of governmental forms was to undermine any resistance to American civil authority.

Still, both French and Emmons acknowledged the legitimacy of individual rights and assumed that the public good would energize civil authorities. French vehemently opposed “the horrid doctrine of passive obedience and non-resistance” as having anything whatever to do with the apostle’s meaning in Romans 13, even as he asserted his opinion that American Christians had no reason to resist their rulers because republicanism and Christianity were perfectly “congenial” and “conformable” to one another (presumably, other forms of government were not so “congenial”).<sup>29</sup> While Emmons could be construed as defending an absolute or “passive” understanding of submission to civil authorities, he, too, emphatically distanced himself from terminology that had obviously become a pariah among establishment evangelicals, at least.<sup>30</sup> Both men’s comments reveal a tension felt by evangelical interpreters of Romans 13 between submission to authority and individual rights. It is important, then, to note that at this stage, more than twenty years after America declared independence from Great Britain, northern evangelical Christian leaders continued to be self-conscious about the difficulty in using Romans 13 to champion submission to American civil authority while at the same time—if to a lesser degree—acknowledging the legitimacy of resistance under certain conditions. With apparent circular reasoning, Emmons sought conversely to make government promotion of the public good a

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<sup>28</sup> “Indeed, there seems to be an obvious reason why such men [usurpers] should be obeyed. After usurpers are peacefully established in their dominions, the people explicitly engage to submit to their authority. Though they promised submission with reluctance; yet having promised, their promise is morally binding. Ibid., 1025-26, cf. 1024. See also John Smalley, “On the Evils of a Weak Government” (1800), in Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons*, vol.2, 1432-1433.

<sup>29</sup> French, *Sermon Preached before His Excellency Samuel Adams* (1796), 6-7.

<sup>30</sup> “Volumes have been written in favor of passive obedience and non-resistance to the higher powers. And volumes have been written in opposition to this absurd and detestable doctrine.” Emmons, “National Fast” (1799), in Hyneman and Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing*, vol.2, 1033.

reason for citizens to cooperate by leading “peaceable and quiet lives in all godliness and honesty,” while at the same time espousing the responsibility of subjects to obey rulers in order to produce the public good. Employing Romans 13:4, he confusingly asserts, “All the benefit to be derived from civil government ultimately depends upon the people’s obedience to civil rulers. The subject, therefore, is under moral obligation, resulting from the general good, to submit to the civil magistrate.”<sup>31</sup> Gillet seemed even more pained to affirm both concepts in his election sermon of 1799, though he clearly gave priority to the concept of submission. He declared that submission to civil officers was essential because “the lust, pride and selfishness of mankind” made it necessary for government to be “a terror to evil doers, and a praise to them that do well” (Romans 13:3, adapted).<sup>32</sup> His comments also suggested a lean toward the kind of “passive obedience” despised by French and Emmons. Apparently realizing the possibility of being thus understood, Gillet quickly moved to clarify his position as contrary to “the ancient exploded doctrine of non-resistance in every situation.” The command to submit, he claimed, was applicable only in “a good government,” and he acknowledged that “There have been tyrannies and usurpations, both in church and state, which ought to be resisted, even unto blood.”<sup>33</sup> Gillet emphasized, however, that resisting civil authority presented serious dangers. With the course of events from the French Revolution through the Terror as a backdrop, he cautioned that “One of these two consequences generally follows opposition to government; either an entire suspension

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 1026, 1028. The initial scripture quotation in Emmons is found in 1 Timothy 2:2. Emmons concluded with Romans 13:4, “And agreeably to this, the Apostle [Paul] says, ‘He is the minister of God to thee for good. Wherefore ye must needs be subject not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.’”

<sup>32</sup> Gillet, *Discourse Delivered at Hallowell, April 25, 1799*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

of law and justice [i.e., anarchy], or more rigid administration [i.e., authoritarianism].”<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of his protest otherwise, Gillet’s message favored submission to any government as favorable to the risks of rebellion. His warning may have seemed prescient when Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in France five months later.

The Reverend French’s chief interest lay in the feebleness of government to form good societies and the necessity of evangelical conversion to accomplish that goal. French’s sermon was representative of growing reticence among evangelical Christians at the close of the eighteenth century to entrust the destiny of the nation to the wisdom of republican government. Civil governments, he insisted, “require something more, than the power and influence of penal laws, to preserve them in order, and promote their great and important uses.” While radicals in France—and presumably within Jeffersonian ranks as well—might trust themselves and their governments to human reason and rational philosophies, the orthodox Calvinism of this Congregational minister prevented him from entrusting so much to human ability, for “the degradations of licentious desires and passions” were too powerful to be overcome with anything less than divine means.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, not just any religious bearing would be sufficient in French’s view. He argued that freedom and good government depended on more than a generically religious collective conscience sourced in reason. “Natural religion is of high importance, and its inducements to righteousness and truth, peace and good order are numerous and weighty;” he admitted, “but they fall far short of the motives of Christianity and give less security to the liberty and happiness of civil society” than genuine (evangelical) Christian

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>35</sup> French, *Sermon Preached before His Excellency Samuel Adams* (1796), 7-8.



conversion.<sup>36</sup> Without this he implied, essential teachings of the New Testament that are critical to peace and happiness in society could never be lived out by most Americans.<sup>37</sup>

Pivoting adeptly, the Rev. French then turned his discussion from the necessity of sincere Christian faith into an opportunity to question the legitimacy of any candidate for president who did not profess such faith. “An infidel, immoral true republican is a solecism in language,” he proclaimed, “Consequently no man, who is unfriendly to religion in profession or practice, ought to be intrusted with any important concerns in government.”<sup>38</sup> Adams’ Federalist supporters—especially establishment New England clergy like French—attacked Jefferson’s moral character throughout the election of 1796, and the following pages of his sermon confirmed that French’s criticisms of infidelity and immorality were aimed at Jefferson.<sup>39</sup> The minister flattered Samuel Adams and the various state dignitaries present, on the other hand, that they met the high bar of religious qualification for public office. Appealing finally for an American identity rooted not only in morality and religion generally, but in Christian character specifically, French equated true patriotism and the clergy’s cultivation of true Christian faith. He expressed his hope that “under the influence of the religion of Jesus” American citizens would become so utterly

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 8-9. Here, French enumerated commands relevant to social harmony from Philippians 2:3, 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 2 Peter 2:10 and Jude 8, in addition to Romans 13:3, 4 and 7.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>39</sup> Jefferson held no less animosity toward federalists, lamenting in the spring of 1796 that in “place of that noble love of liberty, and republican government which carried us triumphantly thro’ the [Revolutionary] war, an Anglican monarchical, and aristocratical party has sprung up” with the “avowed object” of imitating “the British government” in America. Quoted in Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 152.

satisfied with their state and federal governments that they could fulfill the Apostle Paul's exhortation to "be subject, not only for wrath, but for conscience sake."<sup>40</sup>

In spite of Adams' election in 1796, evangelical concern over the role of republican government in constructing a Christian nation continued throughout his presidency. With heightened alarm due to political vicissitudes in France, the Reverend French, who had fought as a teenager in the Seven Years War (1754-1763 in North America), recounted atrocities committed then by the French and their Indian allies. His typical attribution of victory in 1763 to "the GOD of armies" on behalf of the colonists does not stand out as remarkable for clerical rhetoric of the day. But his language reveals on a deeper level his hopes for American society in religious terms. The victory, he claimed, was not just over the enemies of Britain's American colonies, but over "the enemies *of our religion*."<sup>41</sup> Many scholars of American religious history have stressed the importance of anti-Catholic prejudice in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, but French's comments reveal more than viral religious bigotry. He judged the influence of France in North America—during the Seven Years War and currently—to represent a serious obstacle to the most cherished desire of late eighteenth-century American evangelicals: to build the first "genuinely" Christian (Protestant and evangelical) civilization in history. Moreover, though he referenced a time when their French enemies were indeed Catholic, the contemporary context of his remarks concerned what he perceived to be a deist or atheist philosophical—and potentially physical—assault on the Christian identity of the United States.

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<sup>40</sup> French, *Sermon Preached before His Excellency Samuel Adams* (1796), 22. Emmons expressed a similar opinion in 1799. See Emmons, "National Fast" (1799), in Hyneman and Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing*, vol.2, 1030.

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan French, *A Sermon, Delivered on the Anniversary Thanksgiving, November 29, 1798, With some additions in the historical part* (Andover: Ames and Parker, 1799), 18, Sabine Americana, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY103057149&srchtp=a&ste=14> (accessed January 15, 2017). Emphasis mine.

His *Thanksgiving Sermon* interspersed evangelical promotion of Christianity as the rightful religion of the nation with fear of following the example of republican France toward irreligion and what he believed to be its inevitable attendant, tyranny.<sup>42</sup>

More importantly for the present chapter, French evidenced growing concern that such foreign influences could take root in the United States precisely because its people had not moved as quickly toward Christian faith and practice under republican independence as he—and other evangelicals—had anticipated. He complained with exaggerated idealism that after an almost golden age of peace, good government, common interests, and prosperity following the War for Independence, Americans had already succumbed to a self-confident disregard of God. Dangers from without and within resulted from this spiritual indifference. Britain and especially France threatened commerce, but “men of treachery, slander and falsehood, of our own nation” also constituted a part of those dangers. He warned that these domestic foes might succeed in bringing the nation “under foreign influence.” With Jeffersonian Republicans and their pro-French sentiments clearly in mind, the New England pastor reflected the animosity of establishment evangelicals in northern states towards the possibility of another Jefferson candidacy in 1800.<sup>43</sup> But his concerns for the spiritual condition of the nation’s citizens ought not to be overlooked. Similar comments were echoed by other northern evangelicals whose attention and efforts were being drawn away—but not yet fully weaned—from politics and toward spiritual revival as the hope of a Christian America.

In a 1798 sermon on submission to civil authority, Connecticut Presbyterian John Ely (1763-1827) also used France as a dire warning to his fellow Americans who lived in “this day

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 23.

of so general declension, when vice and irreligion abound.”<sup>44</sup> Like French, Ely favored the establishment of evangelical religion under state sanction. Unlike French, Ely retained a vocal commitment to the potential of political means to correct the erring ways of his irreligious fellow citizens. He commended his hearers to consider what had become of that once hopeful revolution on the Continent and to acknowledge “what would be the situation of any people in a moral, or religious view, when once they have thrown off the restraints of civil law; or which is the same in effect, when once civil rulers cease to be a terror to those who work iniquity.”<sup>45</sup> For Ely, fears of French republican excesses drove to the logical necessity of reaffirming the principle of submission to the current constitutional government of the United States and the responsibility of the government to prosecute immoral persons under its jurisdiction. Romans 13 provided the ideal source for his assertion of this principle. Though he shared French’s opinion regarding the declining religious commitment of Americans, he was still hopeful that laws in support of public morality might help stem the decline. Even here, however, Ely pointed toward the coming wave of interest in social reforms that would be spawned by revivals under the auspices of voluntary associations in the near future. In the same breath he appealed for governmental action not only against sedition and rioting but also against “profaneness and Sabbath breaking,” behaviors that would draw the early attention of evangelical social reformers in the nineteenth century. Civil authorities had been granted the authority of punishing evil behavior, Ely argued from Romans

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<sup>44</sup> John Ely, *A Sermon Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church in Danbury, November 25, 1798: It being the Day appointed on which the Address from the General Assembly of Connecticut was to be read unto the People assembled for Public Worship through the State: And also in the Second Presbyterian Church in Danbury, December 9, 1798* (Danbury: Douglas and Nichols, 1799), 5, Eighteenth Century Collections, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T001&docId=CB129463777&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> (accessed May 22, 2015).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

13:4, and it was the duty of magistrates to “exercise it upon every just and necessary occasion.”<sup>46</sup> Apparently, the minister was not convinced that authorities in Connecticut or, perhaps, at the federal level wielded “the sword” of justice aggressively enough to curb vice and rebellion. Again, it was against the backdrop of perceived anarchy precipitated by French republican excesses that Ely delivered his sermon. “Are they as a nation to be respected as honorable,” he asked incredulously, “who have trampled upon all authority human and divine?”<sup>47</sup> From the example of France, the Presbyterian minister found ample confirmation of the wisdom conveyed by the words of the apostle to the Romans, “*Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God.*” For, he concluded, “Without obedience and subjection to those in authority; we cannot be truly obedient to God.”<sup>48</sup>

By the end of 1798, the polarization of American politics had reached critical proportions, with Federalists fearing that Jeffersonian Republicans would bring the worst excesses of the French Revolution to America and Republicans fearing that Federalists would usurp Constitutional power in favor of a British-style monarchy.<sup>49</sup> Republicans could cite as evidence the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts in the summer of 1798. Although she seems to ignore the incongruity of slavery with her endorsement of Jefferson’s and Madison’s lofty ideals “in defense of freedom of the human mind,” historian Susan Dunn rightly assesses that in formulating the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, their probable “aim was not to offer a theory

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 9 cf. 11.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 14. Scripture quotation from Romans 13:2. Italics in original.

<sup>49</sup> Sharp, *Deadlocked Election of 1800*, 15, 57, 80-81. See also Dunn, *Jefferson’s Second Revolution*, 101. Dunn counters historian Richard Hofstadter’s view that the conflict created a “paranoid style” of American politics. Rather, Dunn claims that Federalist expressions of distrust and fear represented “a rational plan to suppress opposition” to their strong central state policies. Sharp provides a reasonable correction to this view, at least in that he contends the fears of Federalists were sincere, not cynically contrived as Dunn suggests.

of nullification and state's rights but rather to protect the integrity of the First Amendment.”<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, Sharp explains, “Many Federalists were certain that the Republican opposition was dangerously deluded at best and seditious and disloyal at the worst.”<sup>51</sup> For some, this applied to Thomas Jefferson just as well as to other Republicans. And, it was not as though Jefferson's patriotism prevented him from contemplating disunion under certain circumstances.

In 1798, John Taylor of Caroline, a colleague of Jefferson's in Virginia, corresponded with then Vice-President Jefferson and argued that secession from the Union must be retained as a possible outcome of Republican conflict with the Federalists. According to Sharp, “Although Jefferson himself was soon to entertain secession as a possible tactic, he was initially shocked by Taylor's extremism. . . . Any discussion of disunion [at that stage in the political debate], he feared, might alienate potential non-Southern Republican support.”<sup>52</sup> Not all Federalists viewed the Republican threat in politically apocalyptic terms. A moderate Federalist opinion of Jeffersonian Republicans was expressed by Washington, who had distanced himself from the fray. In a January 1799 letter, he described Republicans merely as “the discontented among ourselves.”<sup>53</sup> By that time, Federalists seemed to have the upper hand politically, even though the two “proto-parties” were locked in what many believed to be a life-and-death struggle for the proper conception of the common good and for defense against the nation's enemies, domestic

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<sup>50</sup> Dunn, *Jefferson's Second Revolution*, 111.

<sup>51</sup> Sharp, *Deadlocked Election of 1800*, 41.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>53</sup> Washington to Bryan, Lord Fairfax, 20 January 1799, in Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, vol. 14 (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons), 142-143, Google Books, [https://books.google.com/books?id=AT12AAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=AT12AAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false) (accessed January 11, 2017).

and foreign. According to Sharp, Federalist gains in state and Congressional elections of 1798-1799 “stunned and dismayed” Republicans.”<sup>54</sup>

Preaching on the same Thanksgiving in 1798 as French and Ely, Morse retained hope that America’s government would not collapse from Francophile influences through the Jeffersonian Republicans, as other northern evangelicals had begun to fear. “Our ancient and godly institutions,” he opined, “corrupted, indeed, in too many instances, by the baneful principles of the new philosophy, are still preserved among us.” He found particular encouragement in the fact that federal authority was “yet in the hands of men who respect Christianity and its ordinances; who are convinced that *morality* is necessary to good government, and that *religion* is its only sure basis.”<sup>55</sup> By April of the next year, his tone had darkened regarding an alliance with civil authorities in the cause of building a national Christian identity.<sup>56</sup> Despite their diminished confidence in America’s political genius, Phillips rightly assesses that establishment evangelicals were beginning to see hope in the realm of the Spirit. That is, they believed the evangelical renewal beginning to spread across the country would succeed where their faith in the Republic had apparently faltered. Moving beyond his strident support of continued submission to civil authorities in 1799, Emmons concluded in 1800 that the minister’s “first and principal exertions”

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<sup>54</sup> Sharp, *Deadlocked Election of 1800*, 69.

<sup>55</sup> Jedidiah Morse, *A Sermon, Preached at Charlestown, November 29, 1798, on the Anniversary Thanksgiving in Massachusetts: with an appendix, designed to illustrate some parts of the discourse: exhibiting proofs of the early existence, progress, and deleterious effects of French intrigue and influence in the United States* (Boston: Samuel Hall, 1798), 63, Sabine Americana, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY103338244&srchtp=a&ste=14> (accessed January 16, 2017). Italics in original.

<sup>56</sup> Jedidiah Morse, *A Sermon, Exhibiting the Present Dangers, and Consequent Duties of the Citizens of the United States of America. Delivered at Charlestown, April 25, 1799. The day of the National Fast, by Jedidiah Morse, D.D. Pastor of the Church in Charlestown* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1799), iii-iv, 8-9, Eighteenth Century Collections, Gale, Kansas University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T001&docId=CB130241937&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE> (accessed January 16, 2017).

ought to be directed toward the support of religion anyway. Individual religious commitments, he argued, provided “the only basis that can support our free and efficient government,” and they remained “the only thing that can properly denominate us the peculiar people of God.”<sup>57</sup> Regardless of the tide of Democratic Republicanism that would usher the infidel, Jefferson, to the presidency in the election of 1800, there was still cause for optimism that America might become all that northern evangelicals hoped it would be. Phillips concludes correctly that “With the defeat of the Federalists party in 1800, Morse and many of his orthodox [i.e. evangelical] colleagues increasingly concentrated on nonpolitical means of addressing the religious and moral conditions that alarmed them.”<sup>58</sup> This redirection of energies would contribute to a vast expansion of evangelical Christianity during the nineteenth century and produce a culture that came close to fulfilling evangelical hopes for a Christian nation.

### **Election and Presidency of Thomas Jefferson (1800-1809)**

Revivals consumed much energy and focus of northern evangelicals after 1799, energy which had previously been directed toward political concerns. But the overarching goal of evangelicals remained the same: construct an American national identity defined principally in terms of adherence to Protestant Christianity. The purpose of this section is to explore how evangelicals reconciled their vision for a Christian nation with the election of a president whose religious commitments were considerably less than orthodox. Most northern evangelicals had determined that submission was not necessary in the case of a tyrant such as George III. Should Christians still submit to federal government in a republic whose ruler was considered an

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<sup>57</sup> Emmons, “Sermon XI, God Never Forsakes His People,” in *Works of Nathanael Emmons*, vol.5, 184.

<sup>58</sup> Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 103. See also, Emmons, “Sermon XI, God Never Forsakes His People,” in *Works of Nathanael Emmons*, vol.5, 174: “And notwithstanding our present degeneracy in morals and religion, we even now appear in the eyes of all the world, as God’s peculiar and favorite people.”



“infidel” by many evangelical Protestant clergymen? Northern establishment and northern non-conforming evangelicals traveled contradictory paths, but arrived at the same answer to this question: the New Testament called American Christians to submit to federal authority.

In setting out to clarify the cause of religious anxieties, as 1800 drew near and a possible Jefferson presidency loomed, the historian is confronted by the fact that these worries were mingled in various ways with political anxieties stemming from regional, Federalist/Republican, and even internal Federalist rivalries. Writing in May of 1800 to Governor John Jay with concerns over whether New York’s slate of electors would break for Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton expressed his stated goal “to prevent an *Atheist* in Religion and a *Fanatic* in politics from getting possession of the State.”<sup>59</sup> That a politician of such religious indifference as Hamilton found it expedient to convey his disdain for a possible Republican presidency in both political and religious terms reveals something of the challenge in separating religious from political concerns among more doctrinaire religious adherents. Clarity may be gained from distinguishing establishment evangelical views from non-establishment evangelical views. According to Kidd, “The link between Jefferson and [prominent Baptist minister in Massachusetts and Virginia John] Leland indicates that at the time of the founding of the United States, deists and evangelicals (and the range of believers in between) united around principles of religious freedom that were key to the success of the Revolution and that aided in the institution of a nation.”<sup>60</sup> Kidd’s point is well taken, though he summarizes too broadly and draws conclusions about the Revolutionary era from evidence in the early national period. In any case,

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<sup>59</sup> Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, 7 May 1800, Founders Online, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-24-02-0378> (accessed April 12, 2014). See also, Hamilton to Theodore Sedgwick, 4 May 1800, Founders Online, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-24-02-0365-0002> (accessed January 10, 2017).

<sup>60</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 6.

his identification of the link between Baptists and Jefferson rightly demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between establishment and non-conforming political views at the turn of the nineteenth century. To make such a comparison with Jefferson as the focus, it is necessary to briefly describe the new president's religious practice.

In the words of historian Forrest Church, "In the years before he became president, public sightings of Jefferson in a [church] pew were as rare as those of a good New England Calvinist in a tavern on the Sabbath day."<sup>61</sup> The Virginian's habits of church attendance, in fact, may have reflected a contemporary pattern of disregard for religion in his home state. Though virtually all free inhabitants of Virginia at the time would have self-identified as Christian, both local and foreign observers commented on their lack of piety. Church cites a "foreign visitor" to Virginia early in the nineteenth century who claimed that Virginians were "less addicted to religious practice" than inhabitants of any nation he had visited.<sup>62</sup> And Jefferson included himself in a description of Virginians in 1815—perhaps already less accurate than a decade earlier due to the influence of revivals—famously asserting, "We are an industrious, plain, hospitable and honest, altho' not a psalm-singing people."<sup>63</sup> Psalm-singing bespoke the practice of churches in

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<sup>61</sup> Church, *So Help Me God*, 257. I rely heavily here on Church's insightful overview of Jefferson's complicated relationship with Protestant clergymen during his presidency. It is not necessary for the present discussion to examine controversial claims and rebuttals associated with the 2012 book, *The Jefferson Lies*, written by the largely self-educated conservative evangelical historian, David Barton. Barton's organization, *WallBuilders*, identifies itself as "a national pro-family organization that presents America's forgotten history and heroes, with an emphasis on our moral, religious and constitutional heritage." His biography page on the organization's website mentions no formal academic credential in history or law, though it claims him to be "an expert in historical and constitutional issues." He holds a bachelor's degree in Christian Education from Oral Roberts University (1976). His book was disavowed and withdrawn by Thomas Nelson in August, 2012. David Barton, *The Jefferson Lies: Exposing the Myths You've Always Believed About Thomas Jefferson* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012). For a scholarly evangelical critique of Barton's book and a clearer assessment of Jefferson's views, see Warren Throckmorton and Michael Coulter, *Getting Jefferson Right: Fact Checking Claims About Our Third President* (Grove City: Salem Grove Press, 2012).

<sup>62</sup> Church, *So Help Me God*, 234.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Caesar A. Rodney, 16 March 1815, in J. Jefferson Looney, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Retirement Series, vol. 8, 1 October 1814 to 31 August 1815 (Princeton: Princeton University

collective worship rather than individual piety. His lack of church attendance, moreover, betrayed his skepticism of traditional Christian doctrines borne of Enlightenment rationalism. By the time of his presidency, Jefferson rejected miraculous interventions by God in history and the doctrines upon which such interventions were based. He denied, for instance, the virgin birth, miraculous works, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Church offers an important corrective, however, noting that “If Jefferson put no stock in Christian theology, he does appear to have been intrigued by certain forms of Christian polity.”<sup>64</sup> In particular, he seems to have appreciated the Baptists for their church government and their condemnations of state-church establishment.

Jefferson’s opinion of the New England clergy was notoriously poor, and suggests a personal antagonism toward orthodox Protestant Christianity. According to Church, Jefferson “loathed” the established clergy for three reasons:

First, they returned the compliment. Second, he had concluded from history that ‘In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty.’ And third, Calvinist theology offended every precept he held dear, from God’s justice to the universal hope for happiness. Priestcraft, as he dubbed the work of the clergy, was dark magic.<sup>65</sup>

From Jefferson’s perspective, the New England establishment clergy stood in the way of America’s happiness, and so he could not help but seek to dislodge them from their position of influence in the nation. So far as can be determined by this reader, he made no distinction in his opinion between evangelical and non-evangelical establishment clergy. But he did not hold a similar attitude toward all Protestant ministers, let alone all evangelical Christians, even when he disagreed with their theology. As will be seen, he counted the notable evangelical physician and

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Press, 2011), 354–356, Founders Online, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-08-02-0280> (accessed June 11, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> Church, *So Help Me God*, 233

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

treasurer of the U.S. Mint at Philadelphia, Dr. Benjamin Rush, among his personal friends and carried on a lengthy correspondence with him. Moreover, sometime early in his first term as president, Jefferson began attending church regularly to hear the preaching of the Baptist Leland.<sup>66</sup> Leland and fellow Baptist Isaac Backus were the most well-known among many non-establishment evangelicals who supported Jeffersonian-Republican principles and welcomed a Jefferson presidency. Not surprisingly, then, Jefferson's presidency had a complex effect on northern evangelical attitudes toward national authority.

To say that establishment evangelicals opposed the election of Jefferson and bitterly regretted his presidency would be an understatement, but this did not translate into a justification for revolt against national authority. Emmons anticipated that a Jefferson presidency would bring his worst fears home to roost by transmitting the bad influence of Europe's political and religious corruption to American shores. The European nations, he imagined "have for years been using every political art and intrigue, to undermine our religion and government," but "These evils, great in themselves, are greatly enhanced by our present state of doubtful expectation, whether a professed infidel [Jefferson], or a professed Christian [Adams], will be raised to the first seat of our general government."<sup>67</sup> Commenting four decades later on Emmons' understanding of the gravity of the situation, the editor of his *Memoir*, E. A. Park, wrote:

He had watched the course of the French philosophy; he had studied the career of Napoleon; he believed that Thomas Jefferson was thoroughly stained with the infidel principles of France, and that the Jeffersonian party was an ally of the French usurper. He resisted the progress of that party, as he would resist the promulgation of an infidel creed. He regarded himself as defending the *Bible*, when he defended the administration of Washington and Adams.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 258-259.

<sup>67</sup> Emmons, "Sermon XI, God Never Forsakes His People," in *Works of Nathanael Emmons*, vol. 5, 178.

<sup>68</sup> E. A. Park, *Memoir of Nathanael Emmons, with Sketches of His Friends and Pupils*, in *Works of Nathanael Emmons*, vol.1, 138. Emphasis in original.

With similar concern, evangelical Presbyterian John Mitchell Mason spoke as “the voice of warning” to his congregation before the election of 1800 to present “a few plain and cogent reasons, why you cannot, without violating your plighted faith, and trampling on your most sacred duties, place an infidel at the head of your government.”<sup>69</sup> Besides pastoring two Associate Reformed Presbyterian churches in New York City over the course of his life, Mason advocated higher standards for theological education, including competence in the original languages of the Bible. He served as President of Dickenson College of Carlisle, Pennsylvania (founded as a Presbyterian institution, though later under Methodist control), as well as a Trustee or Provost of Columbia College in New York from 1795 to 1824.<sup>70</sup> His willingness to speak so plainly regarding the upcoming election demonstrated a high degree of political and religious angst. But it also reflected his high view of scripture, for he founded the above counsel on the teaching of Romans 13:4. “The civil magistrate is *God’s officer*,” Mason emphasized, “*He is the minister of God, saith Paul, to thee for good*. Consequently his first and highest obligation, is to cherish in his mind, and express in his conduct, his sense of obedience to the Governor of the Universe.”<sup>71</sup> The minister applied this New Testament text in somewhat novel fashion compared to earlier American clergy. The nuance came in that he stressed the people’s responsibility in a republic to compel God’s intended purpose for government not by removing those who failed to comply (tyrants), but by selecting the kind of magistrates who would comply. Duty was thus

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<sup>69</sup> John Mitchel Mason, *The Voice of Warning to Christians, on the ensuing election of President of the United States* (New York: G. F. Hopkins, 1800), in Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons*, vol. 2, 1469.

<sup>70</sup> For a brief but accurate biographical sketch of Mason, see Encyclopedia Britannica Online, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Mitchell-Mason> (accessed June 26, 2015). For the church affiliations of Dickenson College in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Burtchaell, *Dying of the Light*, 129, 265-267.

<sup>71</sup> Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons*, vol.2, 1469. Italics in original.

shifted from magistrate to citizens and from reactive (revolution) to proactive (election) responsibility. Abigail Adams, herself a devout Unitarian, nevertheless expressed the bitter irony felt by many northern evangelicals when the news of Jefferson's election in the House of Representatives reached her as she traveled home from Washington. In a letter to her husband, she wrote, "What an inconsistency, said a lady to me today, the bells of Christ Church ringing peals of rejoicing for an infidel president."<sup>72</sup>

But neither Emmons nor Mason—or any other establishment clergy—went so far as to deny the legitimate authority of a duly elected Jefferson administration. In the vocabulary of northern establishment evangelicals at the turn of the century, resistance did not mean rebellion. Nor were evangelical voices silenced by the Democratic champion's victory. Jedidiah Morse and Timothy Dwight founded *The Mercury and New-England Palladium* in Boston in 1801. With assistance from the prominent Presbyterian evangelical Ashbel Green, Morse and Dwight used the semi-weekly periodical to promote morals and religion in American society and to counter what they believed to be Jeffersonian-Democratic infidelity rooted in the same reprobate philosophy as French "Jacobinism."<sup>73</sup> In an 1802 sermon commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Emmons showed northern evangelical determination to hold the federal government to account by reminding his hearers that "It is also very proper . . . to examine the measures of those in the administration of government. . . . All our rulers in the

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<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Sharp, *Deadlocked Election of 1800*, 166.

<sup>73</sup> Church, *So Help Me God*, 268. For publishing information about *The Mercury and New-England Palladium* (Boston, 1801-1803), see *Chronicling America*, Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042873> (accessed 12 June 2015). For biographical information on Ashbel Green, see Alexander Leitch, *A Princeton Companion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 229-230. Green served at various times as a pastor and as President of Princeton University and The Bible Society at Philadelphia. He actively supported the efforts of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

federal government ought to be tried by the standard of the federal constitution.”<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, some evangelical voices were silenced upon Jefferson’s election, at least in prayer.

According to Church, “The Reverend Job Swift, a graduate of Yale and acolyte of Timothy Dwight, dropped the customary liturgical prayer for the president from the weekly litany, refusing to pray for the chief executive during the entire course of Jefferson’s presidency.”<sup>75</sup> His was a silent revolt, but, there is no evidence that his rebellion extended any further.

Throughout Jefferson’s presidency, many northern evangelicals continued to speak out against the wisdom of entrusting the nation’s highest office to someone whose philosophy threatened to undermine Protestant Christianity. But their application of New Testament texts such as Romans 13 kept them grounded in Christian responsibility to submit rather than revolt, at least in a republic with so much potential for the cause of Christ. As Jefferson began his first term in 1801, Benjamin Trumbull (1735-1820), who would later serve on the editorial board of the *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine and Religious Intelligencer*, published an election sermon on the subject of *The Dignity of Man*. Combining gendered and religious qualifications for civil office, Trumbull wrote, “Particularly, civil rulers, to show themselves men, must be truly and eminently religious.”<sup>76</sup> Preached in May, so close on the heels of Jefferson’s inauguration, the subject of Trumbull’s comment could not be mistaken. He employed Old Testament texts to

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<sup>74</sup> Emmons, “Sermon XIV, American Independence,” 5 July 1802, in *Works of Nathanael Emmons*, vol. 5, 239-240.

<sup>75</sup> Church, *So Help Me God*, 226.

<sup>76</sup> Benjamin Trumbull, *The Dignity of Man, Especially as Displayed in Civil Government. A Sermon, Preached on the General Election at Hartford, in Connecticut, May 14, 1801. By Benjamin Trumbull, D.D. Pastor of the Church in North-Haven* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1801), 16, Early American Imprints, Series 2, no. 1440. [http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=10440521D48A2DC0&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=10440521D48A2DC0&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed June 15, 2015). The *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine and Religious Intelligencer*, vol.5, July 1804 to June 1805 lists Trumbull as one of its editors.

support the importance of piety among other desirable qualities of magistrates, but used Romans 13:4 to affirm the benefits of submission “whatever may be their forms of government, or whatever instrumentality men may have in their advancement.” For, he argued, “By the very nature and design of their office, they are God’s deputies not for themselves, but for the people, to do them good and nothing but good.”<sup>77</sup> His assertion echoed the teaching of Romans 13 with a pastoral assurance that even an undesirable ruler was intended to be “the minister of God to thee for good.” Trumbull’s religious distaste for Jefferson as a man was thus subdued by an understanding of Romans 13:4 that emphasized Christian duty to submit to his office in the state.

Nearing the end of Jefferson’s first term, Massachusetts Congregationalist Samuel Kendal (1753-1814) stated explicitly what Trumbull’s sermon had only hinted at concerning the precariousness of the people’s benefit from civil authorities. “Void of religious principle, or sense of moral obligation,” he warned those who would soon be voting once again for a president, “can we believe that civil rulers will be the ministers of God for good? May we not rather apprehend that they will be an encouragement to evil doers, and a terror to these who do well,” contorting the intention of God revealed in Romans 13:3?<sup>78</sup> He insisted, however, that if free people exercise their votes to select unvirtuous leaders, then “Constitutionally in office, to such an one the Christian will be *subject for conscience’ sake*; but will never willingly aid in his advancement.”<sup>79</sup> Kendal’s displeasure with the chief executive had not compelled him to cross the line that separated legitimate resistance from unbiblical rebellion in the minds of establishment evangelicals. Emmons, also, in spite of his deep antagonism toward the President

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<sup>77</sup> Trumbull, *Dignity of Man* (1801), 15.

<sup>78</sup> Samuel Kendal, “Religion the Only Sure Basis of Free Government” (1804), in Hyneman and Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing*, vol.2, 1254.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 1258 cf. 1250. Italics in original.



and Democratic Republican ideals, maintained a balancing act between criticism and reluctant acceptance of Jefferson's administration. By 1808, he had turned his attention to mitigating the destructive potential of Jefferson's crusade for separation of church and state on the established clergy of New England. Emmons appealed for the essential benefit of "religious teachers" to civil society, declaring, "Though politicians and moralists may read fine lectures upon the public and private virtues. . . . It is the peculiar province of the Ambassadors of God to address the hearts and consciences" of subjects.<sup>80</sup> In this role, ministers should both call civil rulers to their "moral obligations to obedience" to God's expectations of those who "bear the sword of justice" (a reference to Romans 13:4), and to "explain and enforce" the people's "indispensable obligations to respect and obey those in authority over them."<sup>81</sup> Quoting Romans 13:1-7 in its entirety, Emmons asked rhetorically, "can such religious instructions fail of strengthening the hands of civil rulers, and the cords of civil society?"<sup>82</sup> If not, then the place of ministers in American society, he concluded, ought surely to be secured and encouraged by "the powers that be." Rather than continuing the quest to unseat irreligious rulers like Jefferson, Emmons had become content to buttress the role of ministers in society by calling into question only those officeholders who refused to acknowledge ministerial legitimacy. So long as that qualification was met, Emmons was willing to concede that "It is an absurd sentiment that civil dominion is founded in grace, and that none but the subjects of Christ's kingdom are qualified to rule in the kingdoms of men."<sup>83</sup> Emmons' desired concession from Jefferson regarding the clergy certainly

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<sup>80</sup> Emmons, "Sermon XV, Religious Instructors Useful to Civil Society," 7 April 1808, in *Works of Nathanael Emmons*, vol. 5, 248.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

never materialized and proponents of establishment would fight a losing battle in the states for the first three decades of the nineteenth century. But it would appear that the rationale of establishment ministers such as those above helped this influential group of northern evangelicals to stomach political anxieties and disappointments and re-invest their energies in spiritual revival.

Non-establishment evangelicals took a very different route to reconcile their vision for a Christian nation with the election of a president whose religious commitments were considerably less than orthodox. But, remarkably, the net result in terms of their understanding of submission to civil authority was the same. No matter how much New England traditional clergymen, such as the Dwight brothers, lamented the rise of Jeffersonian Republicanism, a vast number of Americans celebrated it. Even their less formal brethren who concurred with them on essential points of Christian doctrine and the experience of conversion by faith in Christ succumbed to the promise of Jefferson's second revolution. His exuberant faith in popular sovereignty compared to the restrained federalist faith in virtuous great men much as the faith of itinerant evangelists compared to settled, establishment clergymen. The former expressed great confidence in common people to make right choices, whether in politics or religion, whereas the latter cautioned the masses to depend heavily on the wisdom of their betters.<sup>84</sup> And the inspiring rhetoric of Jefferson's democratic optimism encouraged Americans to believe that they had agency in the destiny of their country just as revival preaching encouraged them to believe that

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<sup>84</sup> The tendency of establishment evangelicals to acknowledge a need for common people to depend on those of social rank in matters of both religion and politics comes through in some of their writings. Smalley, for example, promoted the value of a clear social order in his sermon, *On the Evils of a Weak Government*. "If parents will not obey magistrates," he warned, "children will be disobedient to parents; if masters refuse subjection to the higher powers, their servants and apprentices will soon pay as little regard to their injunctions. Thus this evil [of disorder in society] proceedeth from the ruler; or from his not being able to rule." Smalley, "On the Evils of a Weak Government," (1800), in Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons*, vol.2, 1431.

they had agency in the destiny of their souls. A “new breed of Methodist and Baptist preachers,” Church fittingly claims, were democratizing salvation, setting souls free to soar by preaching the liberating gospel of a one-to-one unmediated relationship with Christ.”<sup>85</sup> Jeffersonian Democrats seemed to be offering nearly the same intimacy of connection between the people and their political representatives. “When Jefferson assumed office,” Church notes, “the Republicans took center stage in the nation’s sacred political drama. Their cast converged from opposite wings of the theater: philosophical idealists, who envisioned an Age of Reason with the Rights of Man . . . and democratic evangelicals, who foresaw the coming realm of perfect Christian freedom.”<sup>86</sup>

Those “democratic evangelicals” were chiefly concerned with the proclamation of the gospel and the advance of the kingdom of Christ (especially in America). Instead of opposing Jefferson as a dangerous infidel, Church explains, non-establishment evangelicals “squandered none of their energy trying to convert the president of the United States, as long as he granted them full freedom to worship as they pleased.”<sup>87</sup> The free “worship” desired by non-establishment evangelicals did not consist merely of private piety but of public testimony. To seek souls who would worship God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24), they believed they must be free from state interference, such as that which came in the form of licensure to preach. Frontier evangelist Joseph Thomas, for example, openly confessed his allegiance to Democratic Republican principles as most fitting with his understanding of Christianity. “For in the government of Christ, given to his people,” he argued, “I consider there is a perfect *equality* as it

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<sup>85</sup> Church, *So Help Me God*, 287-288. See also, Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 64-66, 195-201. Hatch’s work is currently the definitive analysis on the interplay of democracy in nineteenth-century American politics and religion.

<sup>86</sup> Church, *So Help Me God*, 249.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

relates to power.”<sup>88</sup> Thomas’s comments presuppose attention to and confidence in his ministry as a preacher to persuade Christ’s “people” of their need for salvation and thus shape the nation’s spiritual identity. He acted on confidence in revival preaching that at least supplemented and perhaps supplanted his hope in Christian politics. What he needed to shape the nation’s identity was freedom, not pious political institutions or presidents. This is not to say that non-establishment evangelical Christians were apolitical. Indeed, there were times when their enthusiasm for Jeffersonian Republicanism caused disquiet among their congregants. Church relates how one member of an evangelical assembly recalled the elders of his congregation complaining to their new pastor, “Mr. Page, we employ you to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified [1 Corinthians 2:2], but you preach Thomas Jefferson and him justified.”<sup>89</sup> Most non-establishment preachers simply would not have acknowledged any contradiction between supporting the separation of Church and State and supporting gospel proclamation. Jefferson’s principles in the area of empowering the people fit their evangelistic approach.

The two most prominent non-establishment evangelical supporters of Jefferson were Baptist leaders Backus and Leland. Backus, as has been shown, gradually came to support the American Revolution. But his 60-year ministry in Massachusetts was dogged by the Commonwealth’s attempt to curtail unlicensed preachers and unregistered churches. Baptists endured physical and financial punishments in New England for failure to conform for reasons of conscience to requirements of the state Congregational Church. Backus had himself spent time in jail for refusing to pay the annual tax in support of the established clergy.<sup>90</sup> Though he remained

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<sup>88</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>90</sup> McLoughlin, ed., *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism*, 11-25.

principally committed to his work as a pastor and evangelist, he freely offered his support for Jeffersonian Republicanism. His political attitudes are apparent in a diary entry on December 31, 1802:

And though our government was so mismanaged, that our national debt had been increasing ever since the [Revolutionary] war, and very fast under the administration of Mr. Adams, yet in two years, since Mr. Jefferson was president, the debt has been lessened about ten million of dollars, and they are going on to extinguish it wholly.<sup>91</sup>

His prediction was unduly optimistic, but McLoughlin notes that the debt did decrease from eighty-three million to fifty-seven million dollars under Jefferson. In any case, Backus appreciated political-economic realities in the young nation and they merited recording in his diary, a journal chiefly comprised of his religious aspirations and accomplishments. Two years later, Backus engaged himself politically in support of Jefferson's candidacy for a second term as president. On November 5<sup>th</sup> he attended a town meeting in Middleborough, Massachusetts, to join "a large majority" voting in favor of Republican electors to the Electoral College. And, on December 30<sup>th</sup> of that year he entered approvingly in his diary the election of Jefferson, including the greatly increased number of electors on the Republican side (162) compared to the election of 1800 (73), which had to be kicked into the House of Representatives.<sup>92</sup>

It is no wonder that of all the evangelical preachers whom Jefferson could have chosen to indulge his repeated attendance was granted to the Baptist church of Leland. Leland's enthusiasm for Jeffersonian Republicanism even exceeded that of his older colleague, Backus. Reflecting on the victory of 1800 and the triumph of an expanding popular vote, Leland wrote in 1802:

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<sup>91</sup> Backus, *Diary*, vol. 3, 1483.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 1503, 1505.

But how important is the *right of suffrage*! How far it exceeds the coronation of a king! see all the list of rulers drawn up for trial before the bar of the sovereign people, on days of election! . . . What exertions were made in several of the States to prevent the freedom of the people in the choice of the electors, is fresh in all your minds: But notwithstanding the legal embarrassments which the people labored under, with awful dread and feeble hope, they looked with anxiety for the event of the decision. Never was there an election in America of equal importance! Never were the aristocratical and republican parties so generally paraded in the sentimental field of battle!<sup>93</sup>

Leland clearly favored Jefferson's unwillingness to "intermeddle" with European wars and, in classic New England clerical fashion, though without his establishment brethren's theological requisites, confessed his belief that God had raised Jefferson to the presidency.<sup>94</sup> Turning the concept of submission on its head, Leland asserted that one benefit of the election of Jefferson would be that those who served the people in governmental positions would now be forced to show "proper awe and subjection" to the sovereign people who demonstrated their just authority at the polling places.<sup>95</sup> But for all his radical Jeffersonian rhetoric, Leland desired most the freedom of the people to exercise their faith as they saw fit without the interference of the state. On state power and the rights of conscience, he opposed penalties for "wrong" belief of any kind, unless that belief led to destructive actions. Referencing Romans 13:4 in terms similar to twenty-first-century discussions of hate crimes, Leland contended in another publication in 1802 that "The duty of magistrates is not to judge of the divinity or tendency of doctrines, but when those principles break out into overt acts of violence then to use the *civil sword* and punish the vagrant

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<sup>93</sup> John Leland, *A Storke [sic] at the Branch. Containing Remarks on Times and Things. By John Leland* (Hartford: Elisha Babcock, 1801), 11 cf. 12, Early American Imprints, Series 2, no.813, [http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft\\_val\\_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft\\_dat=104404BCC63B8138&svc\\_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req\\_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE](http://docs.newsbank.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=104404BCC63B8138&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0BCB703019A145A98FF881AFD3E266DE) (accessed June 17, 2015).

<sup>94</sup> Leland, *Storke [sic] at the Branch*, 13 cf. 19. Leland denied that clear proof of Jefferson's religious beliefs had been offered by his critics, but claimed that even if he proved to be a Deist, this was of little concern, for at least it meant that he would not be a persecutor of true Christianity. The logic being that deism was so vague as to allow for any manner of religious belief without compulsion.

<sup>95</sup> Leland, *Storke [sic] at the Branch*, 18.

for what he has done and not for the religious phrenzy that he acted from.”<sup>96</sup> Whether constitutional limits on federal authority or economic thrift among bureaucrats or isolation from foreign wars or disestablishment of religion, Leland favored policies he believed would benefit the free and successful proclamation of the Christian gospel. Like nineteenth-century evangelicals of every sort, he labored in hope of a Christian America.

A more ecumenical voice of approbation for Jefferson came from the notable physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Dr. Benjamin Rush. Yet, his friendship with Jefferson points to the tension that even non-establishment evangelicals must have felt between the President’s religious views and their spiritual goals for the nation. Church stressed that Rush’s Republican enthusiasm was rooted in his evangelical Christianity.<sup>97</sup> Though known to posterity for his contribution to American medicine, Rush devoted himself most ardently to the universal propagation of the Christian gospel. He appealed passionately for cooperation among evangelical Christians of various denominations and sects in what he considered to be the great twin causes of American republicanism and evangelical Christianity. Jefferson and Rush carried on a friendly correspondence during the late-eighteenth century and Rush freely exchanged religious views with the President. Though they were on generally good terms, when Jefferson shared his “Syllabus” of Jesus’ teachings with all references to the supernatural removed, the good doctor was not impressed with its theology. Church humorously describes Rush as “underwhelmed by the Christian minimalism” of his friend.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> John Leland, “The Connecticut Dissenters’ Strong Box: No. 1” (1802), in Hyneman and Lutz, eds., *American Political Writing*, vol. 2, 1196.

<sup>97</sup> Church, *So Help Me God*, 276.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 275; Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, 21 April 1803, in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Federal ed., Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/mss/mtj1/028/028-0191-0199.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2017). The “Syllabus” to which Jefferson referred was an outline of his proposed rational

## Conclusion

In the face of serious fears about anti-religious French republicanism and the election of an American president they perceived to be not only Francophile but probably infidel, what prevented northern establishment evangelicals from applying Romans 13 to justify rebellion against federal authority much as they had done in the 1770s against Great Britain? The most likely explanation—beyond the simple fact that Jefferson had beaten them at the polls—was that northern evangelicals had become confident that their end game of constructing a nation of distinctly evangelical Protestant character could be attained by spiritual rather than political means. As Phillips states, “Revivals and support of the benevolent societies in the United States encouraged the clergy to believe that their country would not fall a casualty in the great battle [between antichrist and pure Christianity] like the nations of Europe, and these happy signs strengthened their resolve to see that it did not.”<sup>99</sup> Establishment evangelicals like Emmons believed the goal could best be attained if civil rulers would grant ministers the leeway to operate with recognized spiritual authority within civil society. Ironically, the same fundamental objective drove non-establishment evangelicals to overlook Jefferson’s lack of evangelical belief and support his presidency. For them, the separation of church and state rather than yoking the

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analysis of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. It was later developed into his critical edition of the New Testament, known popularly as “The Jefferson Bible.” See, Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, Extracted Textually from the Gospels, together with a comparison of his doctrines with those of others* (St. Louis: N. D. Thompson Publishing Co., 1902), Google Books, [https://books.google.com/books?id=AmAJAQAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=AmAJAQAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false) (accessed January 15, 2017). On Rush’s religious and political views, see, A Pennsylvanian [Benjamin Rush, 1745-1813], “An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America Upon Slave-Keeping” (Philadelphia, 1773), in Hyneman and Lutz, eds., vol. 1, 217-230; and Benjamin Rush, “A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and the Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania; to Which Are Added, Thoughts upon the Mode of Education, Proper in a Republic (Philadelphia, 1776), in *Ibid.*, 675-692.

<sup>99</sup> Phillips, *Jedidiah Morse*, 104.



two would free itinerant evangelists and revivalists to do the work of winning the country for Christ.

Noll summarizes well what other historians of American religion and society have demonstrated: “By the early nineteenth century, a surprising intellectual synthesis, distinctly different from the reigning intellectual constructs in comparable Western societies, had come to prevail throughout the United States.”<sup>100</sup> It was a synthesis of evangelical Protestant Christianity, republican political ideology and Scottish commonsense moral philosophy. That synthesis, he observes, enabled a “remarkable Christianization” of America between 1790 and 1865. Historian Sydney Ahlstrom provides evidence for the success of the revivals which became collectively known as the Second Great Awakening. “In 1840, for example,” he states, “when the Old and New School Presbyterians [who had experienced remarkable growth in their own right] together numbered less than 250,000, the Methodists counted over 850,000 members and the Baptists over 570,000.”<sup>101</sup> Even in the Old Northwest states of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, where Presbyterians had pioneered revival ministry and multiplied communicant membership by a factor of twelve between 1807 and 1834, Methodists and Baptists “far outnumbered” their Calvinist brethren by the end of the fourth decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>102</sup> Emphasis on missionary evangelistic efforts to the neglect of denomination spirit continued to mark the expansion of evangelical Protestant Christianity in the North during these years.<sup>103</sup> Thus, while membership growth constitutes a critical measure of the relative evangelistic contributions of the

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<sup>100</sup> Noll, *America's God*, 9.

<sup>101</sup> Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 470.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 458, 470.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 458.

various churches, Ahlstrom wisely cautions, “Such quantitative canons, however, obscure a fundamental phenomenon: the way in which these several denominations, all of them profoundly affected by the evangelical resurgence dating from the century’s first decade, were forging a mainstream tradition of American Evangelical Protestantism.”<sup>104</sup> Acknowledging the progress already made in bringing about the conversion of many since the gospel arrived with the Puritans, the Massachusetts Congregationalist, Trumbull, nevertheless looked forward toward further progress under good government in the United States. “In a Christian state or nation,” he opined in an 1801 sermon, “there are many of the sons of GOD, princes of heaven, who shall reign in life by CHRIST JESUS forever. . . . In presiding over such beings and interests, the highest dignity is manifested.”<sup>105</sup> The dignity of the offices of civil government—and the biblical submission that attended it—was now rooted for many evangelicals not in the religious qualifications of the magistrates, but in the religious character of the people they governed. But as the nineteenth century progressed, revival efforts meant to *form* evangelical Christian character in Americans would also generate pressure to *reform* national identity in the image of evangelical Protestant Christianity. These competing goals would lead not only to a conflict of interests, but to increasing conflict with civil authorities.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 470.

<sup>105</sup> Trumbull, *Dignity of Man* (1801), 14-15.

## CHAPTER 4

### Charles G. Finney and Evangelical Abolitionists: Northern Evangelicals Preach the Gospel and the Cause, 1827–1855

New School Congregational pastor and evangelist Nathanael Emmons had been a Patriot during the Revolutionary War and then adopted a Federalist political perspective as the century came to an end. He was anti-Jefferson and anti-Republican in the contests between Adams and Jefferson. Yet, following Adams' defeat in 1800, he like other evangelicals sought to turn his attention to the spiritual future of the nation with the expectation that God had not abandoned America as a Christian model for the world. Emmons gave early voice to the political fears and—conversely—the religious hopes of many northern evangelicals midway through Thomas Jefferson's first term in office. Concluding a sermon on the spiritual state of the nation in 1802, he declared to his Franklin, Massachusetts, congregation, "let us humbly hope that [God] will not cast us off, but for his name's sake, make us both holy and happy under the influence of his Holy Spirit, and under the smiles of his powerful and watchful providence."<sup>1</sup> Emmons offers a glimpse into the religious anxieties of evangelicals as the nineteenth century began. His hope of religious vitality ("holy") combined with political and economic liberty ("happy") justly represented evangelical desires for America during the next century, however uncertain they may have been. Regarding religious vitality, at least, those desires were already beginning to be fulfilled. For, as American religious historian Forrest Church helpfully observes, "Far from being breached by an invasion of *philosophes*, Deists, and atheists (the specter that Timothy Dwight, Jedidiah Morse,

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<sup>1</sup> Emmons, "Sermon XIV, American Independence," in *Works of Nathanael Emmons*, vol. 5, 241; Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 43-44. In his superb study of American Protestant thought between the late-eighteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Bruce Kuklick identifies Emmons along with Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790) and Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803) as the best examples of the New Divinity following the work of Jonathan Edwards. According to Kuklick, this early example of what became known as the New England Theology followed Edwards' "revivalistic heritage" and "was committed to evangelicalism, a living affectional creed."

and their fellow agitators prophesied would follow hard on an infidel victory), from the moment Jefferson entered office Christianity was on a roll.”<sup>2</sup> As shown in chapter three, this result was not surprising in the least to non-conforming evangelicals like Backus, but New England establishment evangelicals such as Emmons found the revivals of the early-nineteenth century delightfully unexpected.

In his watershed analysis of religion and culture in early American history, Nathan O. Hatch argues that the evangelistic fervor of the Second Great Awakening stemmed from a radical rather than conservative religious movement. Moreover, the decline of both federalism and republicanism and the rise of Jacksonian democracy in the late-1820s were played out primarily on a religious stage, demonstrating the vitality and relevance of evangelical Christianity in this era of American history. According to Hatch, “the transitional period between 1780 and 1830 left as indelible an imprint upon the structures of American Christianity as it did upon those of American political life. Only land . . . could compete with Christianity as the pulse of a new democratic society.” Hatch includes “organized factions speaking and writing against civil authority” among a list of political and social “convulsions” in these decades.<sup>3</sup> In fact, he notes, such challenges to civil authority were closely tied to a “fundamental debate about religious authority” that played out alongside disestablishment and general anticlericalism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Church, *So Help Me God*, 271.

<sup>3</sup> Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 22. Dating the Second Great Awakening, if the revivals of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth are acknowledged to be broadly related, has presented scholars with numerous challenges. Hatch implies start and end dates of 1780 and 1830. More commonly, historians have identified the turn of the nineteenth century as the beginning of a new wave of similar revival events, especially highlighting the revival at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in August 1801. According to Ahlstrom, “The most important fact about Cane Ridge is that it was an unforgettable revival of revivalism, at a strategic time and a place where it could become both symbol and impetus for the century-long process by which the greater part of American evangelical Protestantism became ‘revivalized.’” Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 435. Concerning dates, I find Hambrick-Stowe’s summation helpful: “The revivals associated with the flowering of American evangelicalism, beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century and extending

Still, although questions about legitimate political authority did occasionally surface during the first two or three decades of the nineteenth century, after the election of Jefferson to the presidency these were not the stock and trade of northern evangelicals—regardless of their party affinity. When the issue of submission to civil authority arose, it was either summarily dismissed as a settled issue under the principles of elective government or it was affirmed briefly with scriptural support as a springboard to asserting the primacy and necessity of spiritual revival for the future of the American nation. As shown previously, the revivals known collectively as the Second Great Awakening realigned the focus of northern evangelicals from political to spiritual concerns. In this chapter, I argue that the revivals eventually complicated the goals of evangelicals by igniting desires to accelerate the construction of an American identity rooted in Protestant Christianity through cultural reform. With the complication of evangelical goals, some evangelical leaders—among them the prominent revivalist, Charles G. Finney—grew anxious over the threat that reform efforts might pose to ongoing revival. More importantly, aggressive political approaches to cultural reform tested the limits of evangelical submission to civil authority.

### **Nineteenth-Century Revivalism & Cultural Reform**

Much has been written on the nature, progress and significance of the revivals that began around the turn of the century, gathered momentum in the 1820s and 1830s, and spread along

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through the 1830s, have traditionally been called the Second Great Awakening. The end-date of this movement in the 1830s, however, is entirely arbitrary. In reality, revivals continued until the Civil War without break and the struggle to establish evangelicalism as the cultural norm of American society dominated the entire nineteenth century.” Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, “Charles G. Finney and Evangelical Anti-Catholicism,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 14, Theology and History: Essays in Honor of James Hennesey, S.J. (Fall 1996): 40, JStor, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27671136> (accessed September 20, 2012). However, I disagree with Hambrick-Stowe’s suggestion that it might be better to limit the description, “Second Great Awakening,” to 1790-1810 and call the “subsequent revival work” the “aftermath” of trying to extend its effect beyond New England and the Appalachian frontier to the “entire nation.” Such a severe chronological limit does not do justice either to the similar character or persistence of religious revivals from the late-1790s until the Civil War.

with the growing young nation.<sup>5</sup> Among the most important and novel results of these revivals was a concurrent impulse for cultural reform that especially manifested itself in the establishment of benevolent societies for that purpose. In his magisterial survey of American religious history, Ahlstrom concludes of the features of evangelical enthusiasm in the Second Great Awakening, “Most basic perhaps was a new kind of religious institution, the voluntary association of private individuals for missionary, reformatory, or benevolent purposes.”<sup>6</sup> Alongside their preaching of conversion through faith in Christ, evangelicals created a monumental network of non-governmental—often non-denominational—organizations dedicated to shaping the country in the image of Protestant Christianity and solving what they believed to be pressing social problems. These early-nineteenth-century reform movements carried a decidedly political bent. Ahlstrom notes that John Adams railed against taverns in his home town of Quincy, Massachusetts, on civic or hygienic grounds. Likewise, Presbyterian evangelical Lyman Beecher warned in an 1812 sermon, “Our vices are digging the grave of our liberties, and preparing to entomb our glory.”<sup>7</sup> He associated his “moral crusade” against Sabbath-breaking, profanity and drunkenness with political opposition to those who might support Jeffersonian-Democrats in their stupor and licentiousness.

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<sup>5</sup> Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 442-443. See also, Marion L. Bell, *Crusade in the City: Revivalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1977); Barry Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 422. Phillips adds, “Much of the character of the Awakening in New England obviously derived from the revivals which swept across the region, but it was also shaped by the work of benevolent societies that began to appear about the same time as the revivals. Sustaining each other, revivals and benevolent societies operated together to make the Second Great Awakening different in some very important respects from the first Great Awakening.” Phillips, *Jedediah Morse*, 103 cf. 10, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Lyman Beecher, *A Reformation of Morals Practicable and Indispensable. A sermon delivered at New-Haven on the evening of October 27, 1812. By Lyman Beecher, A.M. Pastor of the First Church in Litchfield* (Utica: Merrell and Camp, 1813), 20, Sabine Americana, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY104005450&srcht=a&ste=14> (accessed January 15, 2017); Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 426.

Causes reflected in these voluntary associations of (mostly) evangelical Christians were many and varied. Some were focused quite narrowly on religious values and “winning souls,” but most concentrated on the application of evangelical conversion to transform societal ills. Already by 1813 Beecher was striking a much more evangelical tone as part of the Connecticut Society for the Reform of Morals.<sup>8</sup> Such voluntary associations included societies to publish and distribute Bibles and evangelistic tracts as well as recruit and support home and foreign missionaries.<sup>9</sup> But in his sweeping analysis of the Christian clergy in American history, historian E. Brooks Holifield demonstrates the prominent role evangelical clergy also played in the rise of organizations dedicated to cultural reform. According to Holifield, “The tract and Bible societies were the country’s largest publishing empires, and between 1789 and 1828, the thirteen leading benevolent societies spent \$2.8 million to pursue their goals, almost as much as the federal government during that period spent on roads, canals, and the postal service.”<sup>10</sup> He notes that the clergy raised most of that money. Other organizations dedicated their efforts to protecting the “Sabbath” from encroachment by business and commercial interests or to combatting social vices such as dueling, alcohol, gambling and prostitution. Still others sought prison reforms,

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<sup>8</sup> George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 12-17, 23-24; William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 111-113.

<sup>9</sup> Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 423-427; Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 143-146.

<sup>10</sup> Holifield, *God’s Ambassadors*, 107-108. Chapter four is most relevant to the current discussion (“Professionals, Populists, and Immigrants”). Given the caveat that he somewhat conflates distinct characteristics of clergymen in America over the decades covered between 1791 and 1861, Holifield offers a remarkably lucid analysis of a broad and confusing field of culturally and theologically diverse ministers across the reaches of a growing nation. For a much earlier but still informative assessment, see Sidney E. Mead, “The Rise of the Evangelical Conception of the Ministry in America (1607-1850),” in *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives*, eds. H.R. Niebuhr and D.D. Williams (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 207-249. See also, Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 424; Emmons, “Chapter X, His Interest in the Policy of the Churches,” in *Works of Nathanael Emmons*, vol. 1, 162-163.

started Sunday schools or educated potential ministers for the growing number of churches.<sup>11</sup>

Benevolent societies relied on cooperation between clergy and laymen and between Christians of varying doctrinal positions. Evangelical revivals were ideal plots in which to grow such cooperation. Though competition between denominations often fueled evangelistic efforts, evangelical commitment to the authority of the Bible and the necessity of individual conversion to Christ were the building blocks of that cooperation.

### **Early Revivals of C. G. Finney—From New Focus to New Methods**

Charles G. Finney (1792-1875) was converted to Christ as a result of close contact with a young, energetic Presbyterian minister named George W. Gale when Finney was already practicing law in Adams, New York. Noteworthy revivals associated with the Second Great Awakening had occurred in various places around the country by 1821, but Finney's conversion was a solitary affair in a forested area on the edge of town. From the trajectory of his personal journey to faith, Finney drew the conviction that many adults failed to trust in Christ for salvation because they lacked proper instruction. He determined to "preach the gospel" as a consequence of finding salvation. Hardman, the author of the definitive biography of Finney, astutely contrasts the "ambivalence in Finney's thought between pietism, as well illustrated in his conversion, and a determined pragmatism that ruled his plans and methods [of revival ministry]."<sup>12</sup> Despite little success in obtaining formal theological training, it did not take long

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<sup>11</sup> Heman Humphrey, *Thirty-Four Letters to a Son in the Ministry* (Amherst: J.S. & C. Adams, 1842), 259, HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.ah692b;view=1up;seq=11> (accessed January 13, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 41.



for Finney to become well known as a preacher.<sup>13</sup> By 1826, people interested in religion all over the northeastern United States were talking about Finney's "new measures" of evangelism, methods calculated to increase the persuasiveness of the gospel and receptivity of listeners. Among the most controversial measures were protracted daily meetings, preaching in colloquial language, praying for the salvation of individuals by name, allowing women to pray in public, and calling those who felt the conviction of sin to come to a designated "anxious bench" at the front of the meeting.<sup>14</sup>

Detractors found theological and practical reasons to criticize Finney throughout his revival ministry, but according to Hardman, the revival at Rochester, New York, from September 1830 to March 1831 marked a turning point after which "he was widely accepted."<sup>15</sup> While this assessment is certainly valid, the exact meaning of "widely accepted" remains open to interpretation. Finney had survived an ecclesiastical investigation as an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church led by prominent Presbyterian ministers Lyman Beecher and Asahel Nettleton in 1827. The conflict did not arise over Finney's gospel efforts *per se*—Beecher and most other Presbyterian leaders were on board with the revivalism of the time—but rather over his "new methods" of persuasion based on novel interpretations of the Calvinistic doctrine of election, in particular with regard to man's innate ability to believe. The gathering of ministers in New Lebanon, New York, was especially concerned over the outgrowth of Finney's reliance on

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<sup>13</sup> "No data remain to tell us [Finney's reaction], but it is a safe conjecture that they went far to solidify his pietistic insistence that he could learn all he (or any *true* man of God) needed from a solitary study of the Bible, and that all human institutions and organizations, including church and clergy, inhibited his work for God. Pietism as well as anti-intellectualism are at work here. One thing is certain; Finney during his Oberlin years may have overcome his aversion to institutional loyalty, but all his life he remained nondenominational, and the seeds of this were surely planted at this time." *Ibid.*, 51. Finney's applications for scholarship aid were rejected by three seminaries in 1822 and 1823.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

human ability in salvation: his defense of “entire sanctification” or “Oberlin perfectionism” as it became known.<sup>16</sup> But even after Hardman’s turning point date of 1831, Finney regularly confronted critics and challenged the status quo of evangelical leaders, even at Oberlin College, whom he believed stood in the way of the progress of evangelism. Moreover, Finney’s broad acceptance from 1832 on was not necessarily taken as welcomed news by his proponents. Charles’ brother and fellow minister of the evangelical gospel, George Washington Finney, expressed great concern for what popular acclaim might do to the character of his well-known older sibling. “If ever I did anything in my life from a sense of Duty,” he wrote to Charles in 1831, “it is writing this letter and must tell you that I tremble for you on account of your unbounded popularity. Yes, my brother, when I look at your elevation in society I almost shudder.”<sup>17</sup> From his brother’s perspective, opposition indicated that Charles’ preaching was stirring souls, but wide public acceptance suggested a decline in the spiritual power that accompanied humility. Was such acceptance also an indicator of the elder Finney’s endorsement of the social *status quo* and the “powers that be” in American political life? It is no mere coincidence that the politically divisive rise of abolitionism occurred in the wake of evangelical revivals, and it will be demonstrated that this particular aspect of evangelical reform would severely challenge Finney’s attempt to champion both revival and reform. The prominent evangelist’s views on civil authority are nonetheless difficult to extract from available records, but his willingness to embrace public popularity in order to advance what he saw as the cause of the gospel helps contextualize Finney’s ambiguity on the subject of civil authority.

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<sup>16</sup> Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 460-461.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 132.

## **Evangelicals and the Abolitionist Movement**

The myriad connections between evangelical revivalism and abolitionist reform in the nineteenth century have been amply explored by historians, therefore only a summary is necessary here.<sup>18</sup> It will be useful, however, to reiterate crucial direct and indirect influences of evangelical Christians on abolitionism, a conception of human rights that historian W. Caleb McDaniel correctly asserts “remained more unpopular in America, and for far longer, than in Europe.”<sup>19</sup> As McDaniel stresses, American democracy provided little impetus to resolve the slave issue in America. Even in the North, election laws and representatives opposing abolitionist causes discriminated against free blacks and supported southern planters. Mob violence against antislavery advocates—especially in New York—remained common beginning in the 1830s. According to McDaniel, “These realities made abolitionists acutely aware of the problem of democracy: majorities could be unjust, immoral, selfish, and unconcerned about the oppression of others.”<sup>20</sup> For these failings, many believed, political systems could not compensate. Individuals needed the internal transformation that accompanied religious conversion and would result in external cultural reform.

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<sup>18</sup> “In an age of transatlantic revivalism, the evangelicals and Quakers who joined the abolitionist crusade also looked on coreligionists in Britain as close sisters and brothers, while some elite abolitionists hailed from families who prided themselves on lineages stretching back to the Puritans.” W. Caleb McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 62. See also, Richard J. Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Waynesboro: Paternoster, 2006). Regarding conflicts among American evangelicals between those advocating immediate abolition and those who were antislavery, but gradualists, see Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 134-142.

<sup>19</sup> “Between the American and Haitian revolutions of the late eighteenth century and the Brazilian abolition of 1888, millions of African-descended people held as slaves in the Western hemisphere became free in the eyes of the law, while observers on both sides of the Atlantic came to regard slavery as antithetical to human progress. But during these dramatic changes, abolitionism remained more unpopular in America, and for longer, than in Europe.” McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 3. It is noteworthy that McDaniel acknowledges strong evangelical influences along with his emphasis on abolitionist ties to reformers around the Atlantic World.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

From various sources, almost all religious and mostly evangelical, six major antislavery groups developed in America between the late 1820s and the late 1830s. In his provocatively titled work, *John Brown, Abolitionist: the Man Who Killed Slavery*, David S. Reynolds identifies these groups as “the colonizationists” (who, from Presbyterian ministerial origins, coalesced in 1816 around the American Colonization Society), “Garrisonian Abolitionists” (committed to the non-resistant, anti-political philosophy of William Lloyd Garrison), antislavery political parties (e.g. the Liberty Party, the Free Soil Party and, eventually, the Republican Party), the Tappan brothers’ evangelical abolitionists headquartered in New York (formally organized as the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in 1840), the Oberlin-based evangelical Christian perfectionists (including members of the community and Oberlin College professors such as Asa Mahan and C. G. Finney), and “the black militants” (such as Henry Highland Garnet, Daniel Walker, and the Langston brothers, John and Charles, in Oberlin).<sup>21</sup> Even those from groups who were not—perhaps better, did not remain—evangelical in their persuasion often found moral conviction in Christian teaching or expressed their moral outrage at slavery in Christian terminology. For example, though he eventually rejected evangelical theology, Garrison was strongly influenced by Baptists in his youth and later by Lyman Beecher’s mix of evangelical revivalism and antislavery reform.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: the Man Who Killed Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 403. Reynolds notes that “A seventh group, the Transcendentalists, though not continuously active in the antislavery movement, contributed to it through their speeches and essays.” See also, McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 66; J. Brent Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism: College, Community, and the Fight for Freedom and Equality in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 148-150, 212.

<sup>22</sup> “Before 1818, [Garrison’s] schooling was confined primarily to religious tutoring from friends of his Baptist mother. Christian faith and the King James Bible remained deeply imprinted on Garrison for the remainder of his life, and in Newburyport, Lloyd became known as a serious young man who pored [*sic*] over sermons and religious tracts and never missed church.” McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 23. “Even after his apprenticeship, Garrison did not immediately move into anti-slavery work. . . . Lloyd’s life did not acquire real direction until he moved to Boston and encountered the preaching of reform-minded New England ministers like Lyman Beecher.” *Ibid.*, 30 cf. 41.

The chasm that grew gradually between Garrison and evangelical abolitionists reflected not only differences of theology but of strategy.<sup>23</sup> Garrison's disgust with the failure of democracy to meet the pressing challenge of the blight of slavery led him to a form of pacifism that disdained any participation in politics. In this regard, McDaniel helpfully contextualizes key flashpoints of socio-political controversy swirling around the Atlantic World in the mid-nineteenth century. When Garrison began his antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, in 1831, McDaniel explains, "democrats were largely on the defensive everywhere but in the United States, while abolitionists were on the defensive everywhere but in Great Britain."<sup>24</sup> Like his European abolitionist contemporaries, Garrison understood the problems of majority rule, yet believed that needed correctives could be found without jettisoning the system.<sup>25</sup> Until such corrections were made, however, he could not conscience participating in the broken system, so he urged his followers to remain aloof from the democratic system and refused even to vote.<sup>26</sup> Evangelical abolitionists in America had what they believed to be a solution to Garrison's disillusionment with democracy: the possibility of real change of heart in individual voters who—following conversion—would be governed by an internal code of Christian morality and ethics that would tear down slavery through the American democratic system.<sup>27</sup> Thus, at this

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<sup>23</sup> James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: the Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 88-96; McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 66, 70. The American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) split in 1840. By 1841, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (AFASS) led by evangelical abolitionist Lewis Tappan had bled off a high percentage of Garrison's AASS membership.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 6 cf. 80-81.

<sup>25</sup> "Garrison made such statements [of pride in American independence] because of his belief in republican government, which predated and outlived his abolitionism." Ibid., 22.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 9. While McDaniel does not make the point, my conclusion here is substantially verified by his citations of contemporary historiography.

early point in the abolitionist movement, if one judges subjection to civil authority by participation in the democratic system, as opposed to withdrawing from it, evangelical abolitionists embodied the more submissive members of the movement.

### **Testing the Limits of Evangelical Submission**

An angry mob pressed ahead toward Pearl Street in New York City where Arthur and Lewis Tappan's prosperous dry-goods store stood open for business. The crowd of New Yorkers was not agitated by corrupt business practices or abusive treatment of labor, but rather by the Tappan brothers' prominent support of the abolitionist cause and by inflammatory rumors published in the *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer* and circulated in handbills around the city.<sup>28</sup> Having received advanced warning, the owners barricaded the entrance and armed their clerks and sympathetic shoppers with firearms for sale in the store. "As the front door was being smashed in," writes historian Keith J. Hardman, "Arthur Tappan coolly gave the order to shoot the rioters only in the legs; just then a company of militia arrived, and dispersed the mob."<sup>29</sup> The store was spared, but rioters damaged or destroyed many homes and churches of known abolitionist ministers and blacks during the riots. Lewis Tappan's well-appointed house was gutted by a mob after he fled with his family on the Fourth of July, 1834, in ironic contradiction of the principles of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>30</sup> The mob's complaint was with Tappan's contention of the basic equality of the black man.

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<sup>28</sup> Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds., *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844*, vol. 1 (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 153; Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 556-559.

<sup>29</sup> Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 265.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 264. Regarding anti-abolitionist violence in New York during this time, see also McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 53.

As a factor leading to the Civil War, historians of nineteenth-century America rightly emphasize the increase in violence between pro-slavery and antislavery factions after passage of the Federal Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. But the event related above occurred over fifteen years before the ill-fated Compromise of 1850 and its controversial law requiring cooperation with hunters of fugitive slaves. It demonstrates that violent confrontations between proponents of the social status quo and abolitionists were not unheard of, even before 1850. More importantly, when New York mobs determined to violently protest abolitionism and Tappan resolved to use force in defense of his store and his convictions, the stage was being set for evangelicals to determine whether they could continue to oppose slavery from within the political system and legal strictures of United States civil authority. At the ideological center of this firestorm of religious, social and political upheaval stood Charles Grandison Finney. In the early 1830s, Finney pastored Chatham Street Chapel and then Broadway Tabernacle in New York City, churches the Tappan brothers attended and in which they periodically held meetings of the New York Anti-Slavery Society. The churches were regularly threatened or damaged by mob-violence in the 1830s.

Throughout his nearly fifty years in public ministry, Finney commanded respect from friend and foe as one of the best-known and most influential men in America. He preached to thousands during the series of revivals known collectively as the Second Great Awakening, and was a key figure in the New York City Prayer Revival that swept the country in 1857 and 1858. Just after the Civil War (1861-1865), Finney wrote a letter to his British friend, James Barlow, in which he contended that this last period of revival before the war laid an essential foundation of moral indignation against slavery, preparing the North to accept the necessity of civil war.<sup>31</sup> Yet

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<sup>31</sup> Charles G. Finney to James Barlow, 22 June 1865, Finney Papers, Oberlin College Archives.

Finney was no instigator of civil unrest. Because religious revival was his chief objective, he prioritized neither social reform nor militant solutions. Ironically, religious revival could also be said to constitute his unwilling contribution to the coming of the Civil War by intensifying Northern moral indignation against slavery. In fact, however, Finney sought to avert the Civil War, which nonetheless came as the realization of more than twenty-five years of fearful anticipation at the interstices of his conflicted worlds of competing priorities: religious revival and social reform.

During his long, complex and influential career, Finney distinguished himself as a pastor, professor and—quintessentially—revivalist. In *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham*, distinguished historian of American religion, William G. McLoughlin, adequately surveyed the highlights of Finney’s “mature” revival preaching:

In the 1840s Finney conducted revivals in Providence, Boston, Rochester, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Detroit during his winter vacations from Oberlin. In the 1850s he held meetings in New York, Brooklyn, Hartford, Syracuse, Boston and Charlestown. He also made two extended tours of various cities in the British Isles in 1849–51 and 1858–60 which included revivals in London, Birmingham, Boston, Manchester, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen. Not until the Civil War broke out did he retire completely from itineracy and even then he promoted revivals annually at Oberlin until his death in 1875.<sup>32</sup>

Considered handsome in his youth and always affable, the fiery evangelist was nonetheless known for his stern countenance and “denunciatory” style when preaching revival, which often succeeded in shaking listeners from spiritual lethargy.<sup>33</sup> Despite frequent and increasingly debilitating illnesses, including bouts of shingles (Herpes Zoster), Finney exerted remarkable energy for revival ministry. Shortly after his death, Hiram Mead, Finney’s colleague at Oberlin

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<sup>32</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1959), 152.

<sup>33</sup> Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 99.



College in Ohio, exclaimed of the evangelist, “Who else could preach three times each Sabbath (*as he preached*) and every evening during the week, filling the day with visits and conversation with inquirers, and all this for a series of weeks, to be repeated without any interval for rest in another church anxiously waiting for his coming. And so on through the year, and from year to year.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Finney’s efforts set a high bar for the exertion of ministerial energies.

While Finney’s role as a revivalist and reformer has received considerable attention, no thorough examination has been made of his view of civil authority or his attitude toward the violence that swirled around him in association with abolitionism. Yet, Finney’s broad influence in mid-nineteenth-century evangelical Christianity makes him a ready subject for evaluating evangelical attitudes toward civil authority during an especially convulsive time in American politics. Thus, the revivalist’s views are noteworthy in that they reveal the conflicted attitudes of evangelicals in the midst of such moral and political challenges as those presented by slavery. For, notwithstanding his strong support for abolition and his eventual conviction that the Civil War was justified, Finney consistently lamented the violence that abolitionism incited—especially against civil authority—and questioned whether the war’s beneficial destruction of slavery was worth its potential detriment to revivals of religion.

Finney’s “new measures” of revivalism had the effect not only of producing a remarkable number of conversions but of empowering a sense of individual agency and responsibility in those who were saved, contributing to Christian social reform movements of the nineteenth

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<sup>34</sup> Hiram Mead, “President Finney,” *The Congregationalist* 36 (Boston, MA), 9 September 1875: 1, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com/ncnp/news/newspaperRetrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DateAscend&tabID=T003&prodId=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchId=R5&searchType=PublicationSearchForm&currentPosition=1&qrySerId=L](http://find.galegroup.com/ncnp/news/newspaperRetrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DateAscend&tabID=T003&prodId=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R5&searchType=PublicationSearchForm&currentPosition=1&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918750909%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22Congregationalist+%28Boston%2C+Ma%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&userGroupName=ksu&inPS=true&contentSet=LTO&&docId=&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3012910138&pageIndex=1&pubMcode=5AKF&contentSet=UDVIN&callistoContentSet=UDVIN&docPage=page&tabLimiterIndex=&tabLimiterValue=&previousPage=page#)ocale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918750909%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22Congregationalist+%28Boston%2C+Ma%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\_DOCUMENT&userGroupName=ksu&inPS=true&contentSet=LTO&&docId=&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3012910138&pageIndex=1&pubMcode=5AKF&contentSet=UDVIN&callistoContentSet=UDVIN&docPage=page&tabLimiterIndex=&tabLimiterValue=&previousPage=page# (accessed November 8, 2012).

century.<sup>35</sup> This emphasis on social reform blossomed at the local level wherever Finney ministered extensively, such as at Union Presbyterian Church in New York, where Finney served temporarily as pastor in 1829. Finney's emphasis on preaching not only resulted in individual, spiritual change, but spawned organized philanthropic efforts to meet the community's physical as well as spiritual needs. Temperance movements represent the earliest expression of concerned Christian activism in response to revivals of religion in the nineteenth century, but new converts engaged in a variety of social reforms.<sup>36</sup> The most prominent and socially disruptive nineteenth-century reform effort to emerge from the Second Great Awakening—and from Finney's preaching in particular—was the Abolition Movement.

It should not be surprising, therefore, to learn that when an evangelical college dedicated to the principles of revival consistently applied in Christian practice opened in Oberlin, Finney would be asked to join the faculty. The town of Oberlin had been founded in 1833 for the very purpose of promoting evangelical piety and “perfection” in America in anticipation of Christ's kingdom. Those who became residents of the highly democratic community committed themselves via their signature to an “explicit agenda” of social and religious reform based on a written covenant.<sup>37</sup> Although antislavery sentiment was high among the early residents, neither the town nor its most identifiable institution, Oberlin Collegiate Institute (later Oberlin College), embraced abolitionism at their inception. Nevertheless, the turn to moral and social radicalism came quickly in response to the community's and school's commitment to revivalism and

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<sup>35</sup> “More than almost anyone before him, this oversimplification of the life of the spirit demanded constant, frenzied activity for God, so characteristic of Finney's own life, and so in harmony with the activism of the period of Jacksonian democracy in America.” Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 99 cf. 151–152.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 184, 254–255. Hardman correctly identifies Finney's characteristic postmillennial eschatology as an important factor in motivating reform efforts. See also, McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 30–31.

<sup>37</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 61, 63.

Christian “perfectionism.” John J. Shipherd, one of the founders of both the “colony” and “manual labor school” in Ohio, proved instrumental in bringing Finney to Oberlin.<sup>38</sup> In December of 1834, Shipherd wrote enthusiastically to his parents of having met Asa Mahan and of the positive revival efforts he and Finney were leading, as well as their uncompromising antislavery declarations.<sup>39</sup> The next year, Shipherd called Mahan to be the Institute’s first president and Finney to serve as Professor of Theology.

Shipherd helped align evangelical revivalism and antislavery reform at Oberlin by strongly supporting the “Lane Rebels” of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, who soon left the seminary to join Oberlin College. It was especially clear in his letter home in 1834 that Shipherd was disgusted by the “gag order” of Lane faculty and trustees that prevented debating the slave issue. But the decision to combine abolitionist reform with evangelical revivalism at Oberlin College had political as well as theological implications. In his recent thorough study of Oberlin’s centrality to the abolitionist movement, J. Brent Morris writes:

With the clear turn to abolitionism after the arrival of the Lane Rebels and the subsequent national celebrity that the school and town attained, reformers from Oberlin stayed below the radar of what would prove to be a tremendously hostile state legislature only for a short period. In December of 1835, residents of Oberlin commenced their determined campaign to effectively be a thorn in the side of the Ohio legislature by sending in their first petition for the repeal of the state’s Black Laws. From that point forward, their relationship with the state government would be an extraordinarily turbulent one.<sup>40</sup>

According to Morris, “Most Oberlinites were immediatist moral agitators who also happened to seek change through politics. Their commitment to abolitionism sprang from their perfectionist

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<sup>38</sup> “R/G 30/83 – John J. Shipherd (1802-1844) Biography,” Oberlin College Archives, <http://www.oberlin.edu/archive/holdings/finding/RG30/SG83/biography.html> (accessed January 30, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> John J. Shipherd to “Dearest of Parents” [Mr. and Mrs. Zebulon R. Shipherd], 19 December 1834, No. 30/83, Box 3, 4, Other Individuals, Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>40</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 88.

understanding of the moral law, developed in their churches and antislavery societies, and applied to their political agenda.”<sup>41</sup> This balance of evangelical-based activism helped Finney determine that Oberlin College could be a strategic staging area for sending out well-equipped missionaries of both the gospel and cultural reform without compromising the pre-eminence of revival in their priorities.

In 1835, Finney wrote in his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, “Consequently, the silence of Christians upon the subject [of slavery] is virtually saying *that they do not* consider slavery as a sin. The truth is, it is a subject upon which they cannot be silent without guilt.”<sup>42</sup> Finney’s explicit identification of slavery as “a sin” marked him as aligned with radical abolitionism, because according to Finney sin—once acknowledged—must be immediately forsaken. The radicals advocated an immediate rather than gradual end to slavery. And, the revivalist followed his moral argument against the “peculiar institution” with practical policies in his churches, reminding readers of his treatise on revival that “We have from the beginning, *previous* to my going on my foreign tour, taken the same ground on the subject of slavery that we have on temperance. We have excluded slaveholders and all concerned in the traffic from our communion.”<sup>43</sup> As might be expected, not everyone was equally convinced of the correlation between Christian piety and antislavery commitment, and Finney’s opponents often pointed out the dangerous path down which abolition could lead toward civil rebellion. Disgruntled former Oberlin student Delazon Smith, who had been excommunicated from the Oberlin Church in

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>42</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oberlin: E. J. Goodrich, 1868), reprinted in Richard M. Friedrich, ed., *The Life and Works of Charles G. Finney*, vol. 1 (Fenwick: Truth in Heart Publishing, 2005), 270. Twenty volumes are planned in this series. As of the submission date of this essay, only the first three have been published.

<sup>43</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals*, 282. The policy of excluding slaveholders from Finney’s church in New York City apparently dated from November of 1834.

1837—presumably under circumstances described by Finney above—responded with an attack on New Light doctrine and practice at Oberlin. President Mahan, the student complained, was willing to disobey the law of the land and to fight against slave catchers to defend the freedom of runaways, a position Smith clearly thought to be unchristian.<sup>44</sup> Due to the bitterness he obviously held against Oberlin, Smith’s report must be taken as suspect in its details of Mahan’s position at this time, but it is consistent with Mahan’s views later after the passage of Ohio’s Fugitive Slave Law in 1839.<sup>45</sup> Thus, his concern regarding the civil implications of Mahan’s abolitionist stance was well founded.

So intertwined were Finney’s commitments to evangelism and reform that it is difficult at certain points in Finney’s career to distinguish the revivalist from the abolitionist. On July 26, 1848, for example, Oberlin abolitionists wrote an open letter with four “articles” conveying their “views of what is now demanded of the friends of freedom, and especially of political Abolitionists.”<sup>46</sup> The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) had just been formally concluded in February with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and nationalism was running at high tide in America. But the war had complicated the debate over slavery by making possible its extension to vast new territories acquired from Mexico.<sup>47</sup> The central tenet of the articles was to define a “true Abolitionist.” The signatures of Finney and six others who intended to advance the

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<sup>44</sup> Delazon Smith, *Oberlin Unmasked: A History of Oberlin; or, New Lights of the West* (Cleveland, 1837), 57-66, Robert S. Fletcher Papers, RG 30/24, Box 12, Research Files, Typescript Copies, 1816-1898, Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>45</sup> Oberlin’s opposition to Ohio’s Fugitive Slave Law (1839) and the Federal Fugitive Slave Act (1850) is discussed below and in chapter five.

<sup>46</sup> “To the Friends of Freedom,” *Daily True Democrat* (Cleveland, OH), 2 August 1848: n.p., Finney Papers, transcribed in Richard A. G. Dupuis Collection, Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>47</sup> David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, America Before the Civil War: 1848-1861*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York: Harper Perennial, 1976, repr. 2011), 181-183; Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 268-269.

antislavery cause in the upcoming election appeared below the articles which were published in Cleveland's *Daily True Democrat* on August 2. By 1848, Finney's views on slavery placed him squarely in the camp of the radical abolitionists, yet he had long been cautious about the means of advancing the cause among Christians. On the topic of debating slavery, Finney warned in his *Lectures* (1835), "First of all, a *bad spirit* should be avoided. Nothing is more calculated to injure religion, and to injure the slaves themselves, than for Christians to get into an angry controversy on the subject."<sup>48</sup> It is apparent that Finney's concern for Christian unity interfered with his efforts to see slavery abolished.

A firm yet labored hierarchy in the revivalist's thinking explains Finney's cautious attitude, despite his thoroughgoing radical antislavery convictions. Abolitionist Theodore Dwight Weld (1803–1895) wrote to Lewis Tappan from Oberlin College where Weld was lecturing in 1835, "The truth is Finney has always been in revivals of religion. It is his great business and *absorbing passion* to promote them. . . . Finney feels about revivals of religion and the promotion of the church and ministry in doctrines and measures; just as you and I do about anti slavery."<sup>49</sup> Weld's perceptive assessment remained true of Finney throughout the revivalist's life. Even though he befriended and supported abolitionists like Tappan and Weld, Finney ranked revivals of religion above his commitment to the abolition of slavery.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals*, 279.

<sup>49</sup> Barnes and Dumond, *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld*, vol. 1, 243. Oberlin Collegiate Institute became Oberlin College in 1850 by an Act of the Ohio Legislature. For clarity, the latter is used throughout this essay.

<sup>50</sup> "As Robert Fogel points out, the broadening of the antislavery appeal was largely a process of secularization, yet the secular arguments never entirely supplanted the religious ones precisely because so many of the principal leaders of the political movement were deeply religious men [and women] and also because evangelicals were a huge political constituency that would never be converted to the antislavery argument through strictly secular appeals." Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 93; Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 323.

The priority of revival over antislavery reform can be observed in Finney's commitment to Christian higher education at Oberlin College. According to McLoughlin, Finney's interest in abolition was hesitant and vacillating but his interest in educating a new set of revival men to replace the inefficient and lukewarm graduates of eastern seminaries had always been strong."<sup>51</sup> In the first place, this vacillation on the subject of abolition did not proceed from uncertainty about the evil of slavery or the rightness of emancipation, but from Finney's conviction that revival must necessarily precede any true change in social conditions. "You may do anything else you please," Finney wrote, "and you can change the aspects of society in some respects, but you will do no real good; you only make it worse without a Revival of Religion."<sup>52</sup> Thus, in 1836, when his friend and ardent abolitionist, Weld, sought to recruit Oberlin students as antislavery lecturers, Finney resisted. "Though he rejoiced at the results of the recent lecture tours of his students," Morris writes, "Finney maintained (as he would the entire antebellum period) that focusing solely on abolitionism often confounded broad revivalism and that oftentimes violent responses to antislavery agitation was a prelude to civil strife that threatened to tear apart the United States."<sup>53</sup> It is clear that Finney believed arousing violent passions in those who favored or at least tolerated slavery would turn society away from the central priority of responding to the gospel.

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<sup>51</sup> McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 82.

<sup>52</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals*, 19. See also Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 185; Robert Samuel Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College, From Its Foundation Through the Civil War*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971), 252.

<sup>53</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 49. Based on positive results from sending abolitionist lecturers as direct agents to Ohio, New York and Massachusetts, Weld and others in the Cause set about to recruit and send out seventy more, giving preference to Oberlin theological students. These were referred to—with poignant reference to the New Testament—as "the seventy" (cf. Luke 10:1).

Despite Finney's reticence, students were encouraged to think independently and he did not coerce them to refuse Weld's request. Indeed, over the next two decades many responded to the call to preach the cause of abolition. Oberlin Seminary student John Todd represented the type of abolitionist students Oberlin College and Seminary produced as early as the 1840s. In an 1842 letter to his fence-riding cousin, Todd defended immediate abolition with all the passion his theology and politics could muster. "You seem to express not a little surprise at some of our 'doings' here," he penned wryly, "especially at our Antislavery efforts."<sup>54</sup> From hindsight, Todd's letter seems naïvely confident at "the prospect" of national antislavery efforts in the early 1840s. Yet the sincerity and exuberance of the young seminarian bespeaks the heady determination of evangelical abolitionists at Oberlin. "The fundamental principles of this reform," he declared, "are eternal truth and cannot be shaken." Of particular encouragement to Todd was his perception that the "most devoted Christians" were the "strongest advocates" of antislavery reform.<sup>55</sup>

The atmosphere at Oberlin had a profound effect on the young man. He confided that he had already taken time from his theological studies to write an "address" on the subject of abolition. "To speak plainly, Margaret," he gushed, "I am very near lecturing on the subject this winter, and probably shall do so next winter. What do you say to that? Heh? Will you call me a fanatic?"<sup>56</sup> He reveled in the scandalous nature of the cause for his apparently more sedate Christian relative, but more importantly, he fully understood the potential ramifications of antislavery agitation in the current American political milieu. Comparing antislavery reform to

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<sup>54</sup> John Todd to "Dear Cousin" [Margaret G. Strohm], 21 February 1842, 1, Letters By Students, File 21, Box 1, Folder 3, Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 3. Emphasis in original and so throughout.



Christ's call to love and serve the needy, Todd defended the possibility of civil disobedience in the name of abolition, arguing, "If to clothe the naked, feed the hungry—Do to others as ye would that they should do to you—and deliver the poor from the hand of the oppressor, be 'Conspiracy,' I glory in such Conspiracy."<sup>57</sup> Most pointedly, this young devotee of abolition wrote with the clear intention of stirring his cousin to lay aside her tepidness and embrace the cause, even if it meant defying the law. He contrasted the fervor for antislavery activities at Oberlin with his cousin's own depiction of a respectable Christian environment: "You say that 'few in your neighborhood would justify a clandestine egress of Slaves to a British province.'<sup>[1]</sup> I might say that there are few in this neighborhood that would not justify such a course; and which community is the most intelligent on this subject?" Moreover, Todd revealed that at least some in Oberlin at this early date even found justification for a violent slave insurrection. "But I go farther," he wrote, "the slaves would be justifiable in rising and asserting and maintaining their liberty by force. . . . I don't believe any man in the world can justify the war of the American Revolution, and at the same time condemn the slaves for rising to obtain their liberties."<sup>58</sup> Although he tempered his strong assertions with the moderating parenthetical aside that he would advise slaves "to wait in hope of obtaining a peaceable deliverance," Todd's testimony yields crucial evidence of evangelical abolitionists openly debating and validating political rebellion in the service of a greater moral goal.

The incongruity of slavery with American liberty and with evangelical conceptions of Christian duty had tested the limits of biblical submission to civil authority and, as early as 1842, had brought those convictions near the breaking point, at least for some. And, Todd's appeal to

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 4.

the American Revolution should not be taken too lightly. By appealing in a way that assumed his cousin (like virtually all Christians at the time) would justify America's rebellion against England in the service of a greater cause, Todd made it clear that the construction of an American identity rooted in evangelical values trumped his responsibility to submit to civil authority.

Student activism of the kind exemplified by Todd caused Finney great concern. Had he read it, Todd's letter would have furnished proof that passion for abolition was eclipsing passion for evangelism. Finney's conviction with regard to the priority of religious revival led him to disdain anything that distracted young potential evangelists from preaching the gospel or anything that might prejudice his hearers against responding to the gospel message. As he saw it, lecturing on the abolitionist circuit was a distraction to young preachers and the violence that zealous abolitionists seemed to provoke whenever they organized publically or politically to demand an end to slavery prejudiced Americans against the evangelical message. Finney had been greatly disturbed by mob violence of the sort that invaded the Chatham Street Chapel after the Tappan brothers held the first meeting of New York City's Anti-Slavery Society there in 1833. Such violence provided a backdrop for Finney's letter to Weld three years later. "One most alarming fact," he made plain, "is that the absorbing abolitionism has drunk up the spirit of some of the most efficient revival men & is fast doing so to the rest. & many of our Abolition brethren seem satisfied with nothing less than this."<sup>59</sup> The above letter by one of Finney's seminary students illustrated his point. Despite the focus of Todd's ministerial studies at Oberlin, he neglected to comment on religious concerns such as revival until he was nearly finished, and

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<sup>59</sup> Charles G. Finney to Theodore Dwight Weld, 21 July 1836, Finney Papers, transcribed in Richard A. G. Dupuis Collection, Oberlin College Archives.

then only as an afterthought in the margin just before mailing. “There is a very great interest here at present in the subject of religion,” he added hastily, “and powerful revivals have attended Pres. Mahan’s and Prof. Finney’s preaching at the east.”<sup>60</sup> According to Hardman, “Lewis Tappan, frantically busy in the promotion of a myriad of good causes and currently embroiled in the violence over slavery, had, in a rare moment of reflection, quietly admitted to Lydia Finney that the antislavery cause was replacing revivals in the church.”<sup>61</sup> His student’s correspondence priorities and Tappan’s admission would only have thrown fuel on the fire of Finney’s internal struggle over how to manage cherished values of revival and reform.

### **Evangelical Anxieties: Abolition, Civil Disobedience and War**

Throughout his life, Finney gave every indication that he held some form of the “Just War” position, formulated by Christian theologians during the Middle Ages.<sup>62</sup> During the War of 1812, Finney volunteered for service with the New York militia. Since he was not converted until 1821, the fact that he volunteered cannot be indicative of mature Christian conviction on the subject.<sup>63</sup> In 1843, however, along with students and fellow faculty members at Oberlin College, Finney debated the question of the proper Christian position on war. Historian Robert Samuel Fletcher summarizes, “The faculty, under the lead of Professor Finney, took the position that all war was not necessarily sinful, but the opposition must have been pretty stiff, for the adjourned

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<sup>60</sup> Todd to “Dear Cousin,” 1.

<sup>61</sup> Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 273. Lydia was Charles Finney’s wife.

<sup>62</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace and Revolution*, eds. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 88-104. According to Yoder, categories relevant to “Just War” theory consist of five that define *jus ad bellum* (“the law having to do with going to war”) and one that defines *jus in bello* (“the use of legitimate means” in war). All criteria must be satisfactorily met for a war to be considered “just” in medieval Christian theology. The sophistication of Finney’s understanding or application of medieval “Just War” theory is unclear.

<sup>63</sup> Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 41.

meetings [in April] were still being held well into May.”<sup>64</sup> Jane B. Trew, a student who attended the debates, wrote to a relative, “The discussions lasted for several weeks, they were the most interesting I ever attended. Prof. Finney says that selfishness & that alone is sin. Then all war if it is sin must be selfish, which he thinks cannot be proved.”<sup>65</sup> At least in the mind of this student, Finney’s view was clear and definitive. However, there is no indication that the debate addressed the potential morality of a war instigated by civil revolt, as had occurred during the American Revolution, or by political secession, as would occur in 1861. Indeed, Finney’s public responsibility as a key leader among evangelical abolitionists would elicit clearer explanation of his understanding of submission to civil authority as the debate over slavery heated in the decade before civil war erupted in America. Six years later, in 1849, Finney wrote of his conviction, “There can be no reasonable doubt war has been in some instances demanded by the spirit of moral law.”<sup>66</sup> But his declaration elides the misgivings Finney had regarding the role of civil revolt—even violent revolt—in defense of moral law.

Finney’s public theological stance on war fails to reveal the extent of the revivalist’s conflicted feelings on the matter. The debates in 1843 were not the first time that Finney and Oberlin students struggled together over the ethics of violence in the service of moral principles. When he arrived at the college as Professor of Theology in 1836, the school’s commitment to abolitionism was being solidified. Weld had given a series of lectures at the college—daily for twenty days—in November of 1835. Historians Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond contend that Weld convinced all in attendance to adopt not only abolitionism, but also

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<sup>64</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 275.

<sup>65</sup> Jane B. Trew to Andrew Trew, 29 May 1843, quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 280-281.

immediatism (the view that all slaves in America ought to be freed without prior condition and with deliberate speed).<sup>67</sup> According to Fletcher, Finney's appointment as professor of theology in 1836 was part of Oberlin's formation of a "new anti-slavery faculty to have control of internal administration of the institution."<sup>68</sup> Finney along with John Jay Shipherd, co-founder of Oberlin College, and Asa Mahan, president of Oberlin, were the first faculty members to subscribe to the new abolitionist constitution of the school, guaranteeing that the institution would stand for an antislavery agenda. The Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society, with 230 members, formed about this time as well, but its charter called for "moral suasion" to accomplish the objective of immediate emancipation. In other words, Oberlin faculty and students believed—undoubtedly encouraged by Finney—that the new revival measures, not violent opposition, held the key to ending slavery. Thus, in a letter to Weld in July of 1836, Finney expressed his deep concern that the abolitionist cause might lead to war:

My particular object in writing to you at the present time is to talk with you a little about the present state of the church, our country, Abolition &c &c[.] Br[other] Weld is it not true, at least do you not fear it is that we are in our present course going fast into a civil war. Will not our present movements in abolition result in that[?] Shall we not ere long be obliged to take refuge in a Military despotism? Have you no fear of this? If not why have you not?<sup>69</sup>

More than any other single statement, Finney's anxious inquiry to Weld revealed his lifelong struggle over the violent implications of abolitionist agitation and the uncertain consequences of war on his cherished goal of spiritual revival.

But by 1840 at least, the college was split between "radicals" who saw all use of force as unrighteous and "conservatives" who held that war and the use of violence may be justifiable in

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<sup>67</sup> Barnes and Dumond, *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld*, vol.1, 242, n. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 236.

<sup>69</sup> Finney to Weld, 21 July 1836.

certain circumstances.<sup>70</sup> Some scholars have found what they believe to be evidence of an apparent change in the antislavery fervor of Oberlin after 1840. Fletcher, most notably, suggested a diminished enthusiasm for antislavery among some students and townspeople that he attributed to Finney's influence in the service of revivalism.<sup>71</sup> In a 1969 iteration of this interpretation, Duke University PhD candidate Barbara Zikmund similarly concluded that a change at Oberlin reflected how students arrived at their convictions once the revivalist's influence had been felt, being in her words, "*nurtured* in the faith, rather than converted to the cause."<sup>72</sup> Zikmund's characterization of the religious path by which Oberlin students generally arrived at their abolitionist convictions is correct. But the purported shift away from abolitionist zeal, if it occurred at all, could have been barely perceptible to those who experienced antislavery agitation at Oberlin during the 1840s.

Passage of Ohio's Fugitive Slave Act in 1839—eleven years before the more infamous national statute—appears to have pushed numbers in the town and at the College toward more aggressive tactics in opposing slavery. It clearly stoked disagreement with regard to the Bible's requirements concerning submission to civil rulers, such as that found in Romans 13:1-7.<sup>73</sup> "In a town like Oberlin, which had always held a sober respect for governmental authority," Morris

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<sup>70</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 271-272. The use of "radical" in this context was theological and referred to Christian pacifism.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>72</sup> Barbara Zikmund, "Asa Mahan and Oberlin Perfectionism" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1969), 78, Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>73</sup> Emmett D. Preston, "The Fugitive Slave Acts in Ohio," *The Journal of Negro History* 28 (October 1943): 427-428, JStor, <http://www.jstor.org.er.lib.k-state.edu/stable/2714948> (accessed July 14, 2015). Though representative of older scholarship, this lengthy article offers an exceptional survey of attitudes toward and applications of state and national slave laws in Ohio up to the time of the Civil War.

explains, “some citizens were unsure of their obligations under [the Fugitive Slave Act].”<sup>74</sup> Finney’s opposition to the Ohio law—which he consistently called the Fugitive Slave *Bill* because he refused to acknowledge its lawful character—nevertheless did not convey an outright rejection of civil authority. He did not turn from established religious and political avenues in his quest for cultural reform. This fact exposed Finney to severe criticism from the non-evangelical, but radically nonresistant abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>75</sup> Through his editorials in the *Oberlin Evangelist*, Finney reacted forcefully and condemned Ohio’s recent statute, but his language fell far short of openly advocating rebellion. He did, however, begin subtly to build what would become a theological basis for civil disobedience. In a lecture published barely two weeks after the Ohio legislature adopted the new fugitive slave provision, Finney expounded on the meaning and significance of Jesus’ teaching regarding the Old Testament’s command, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”<sup>76</sup> Without singling out the new Ohio Fugitive Slave Law, Finney began a section distinguishing divine from human law with the following claims:

And let me begin by saying, that it is one of the first principles of common law, that whatever is contrary to the law of God is not law, (i.e.) is not obligatory upon men. So that the difference between human laws, and the law of God, is not that they are contrary, the one to the other, for, properly speaking, any human enactment, that is contrary to the law of God, is, after all, not law.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 97. In the same chapter, Morris offers a lengthy but enlightening summary of Oberlin’s turn toward secular, political means in the fight against slavery from the late-1830s through the 1840s. Some highlights of his analysis include evangelical theological trends such as post-millennialism and Oberlin perfectionism, as well as more traditional doctrinal influences like the role of human government in affecting God’s moral government on earth. Morris notes, “Their meticulous study of the Bible [presumably Old and New Testaments] showed conclusively that God regularly exerted moral influence through the instrumentality of worldly governments and actually commanded His people to obey magistrates and rulers [e.g., Romans 13:1-7].” *Ibid.*, 91 cf. 90-94.

<sup>75</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 118. The practical effects of Garrisonian “nonresistance” are well summarized by Morris on page 123.

<sup>76</sup> Matthew 22:39 cf. Leviticus 19:18.

<sup>77</sup> Charles G. Finney, “Prof. Finney’s Lectures, Lecture VI, The Law of God—No.2,” *The Oberlin Evangelist* 1 (Oberlin, OH), 13 March 1839: 1, Oberlin College Library Special Collections, <http://obis.oberlin.edu:2082/record=b1740880~S4> (accessed February 28, 2016).

One might infer from Finney's words that he was opening the door to civil disobedience on the basis of a "higher" law of God. Certainly his comments move in that direction. But it is not at all clear from the published lecture that Finney's intention was, as Morris implies, to justify direct disobedience to any "human" law—at least not in 1839.<sup>78</sup> Rather, it would appear that while building a theoretical foundation for civil disobedience, Finney also sought to disparage any would-be insubordination to civil authority. He immediately continued with praise of human laws, declaring that "Their requirements are good, so far as they go, and should be strictly obeyed. But as they fall short of the requirements of God's law, they may be strictly obeyed, without one particle of virtue, or holiness."<sup>79</sup> In other words, the context of the professor's lecture was his understanding of the demands of the gospel upon those who believe—what became known as Oberlin Perfectionism (holiness). Finney's concern was that obedience to human law might be seen to adequately substitute for a radical change of heart, producing complete sanctification in the life of the believer.

Morris is correct, nevertheless, when he points out that "To combat the usurpation of the Slave Power of moral and political authority, Finney, more than a decade before the more widely publicized public statements of William Seward or Theodore Parker, invoked a doctrine of 'higher law' for Americans to follow."<sup>80</sup> The higher law was a divine moral code to which Christians could and must appeal in refusing submission when civil law compelled them to act against biblically derived convictions. It would later provide crucial justification for evangelical

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<sup>78</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 101.

<sup>79</sup> Finney, "Law of God," 2.

<sup>80</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 97.



abolitionists to violently oppose American slavery. But Finney did not advocate anything like violent opposition to slavery in the 1840s or 1850s, let alone violence that resisted the “powers that be” (Rom.13:1). The revivalist’s assertion of a higher law theory merely demonstrated the tension evangelical abolitionists felt between their commitment to submission to civil authority and their commitment to the cause of abolition as an essential outgrowth of religious revival.

As president of Oberlin College (1851-1866), Finney contended with those whom he thought abandoned hope in the “revival first” strategy of reform, whether they favored emotional appeals to moral justice or supported violent means to rid the nation of slavery.<sup>81</sup> Fletcher describes how the tenor at Oberlin changed over the decades in light of the failure of reform efforts—efforts that, in Finney’s view, neglected revival ministry. By the early 1850s, some in Oberlin concluded that “moral suasion had failed for the most part to show great immediate results, and, as it failed,” Fletcher writes, “resort was made to direct action. . . . an appeal to force.”<sup>82</sup> In addition to continued insistence on the preeminence of revival ministry, therefore, President Finney increased his emphasis on the theology of civil and divine authority in his college teaching. In lecture notes, first delivered to Oberlin students then published in America in 1846 and “revised, enlarged, and partly re-written by the author” for an 1851 British edition, Finney took up the question of how human government fits within the divine plan of moral government. By way of overview, Finney claimed that human government was “indispensable” to the accomplishment of God’s good purpose for creation. He also sought to establish from scripture the basis for human governments’ authority as well as its limits in relation to the rights

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<sup>81</sup> Finney had previously served as acting President of the college in 1849.

<sup>82</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 415-416.

of subjects.<sup>83</sup> In keeping with the revivalist's modified Calvinist theology, which re-defined human sinfulness in terms of moral choice rather than original inheritance, he did not make the right of civil authority dependent on the restraint of sin. "If all men were perfectly holy," he conjectured, "and disposed to do right, the necessity for human governments would not be set aside, because this necessity is founded in the ignorance of mankind, though greatly aggravated by their wickedness."<sup>84</sup> Thus, Finney insisted that "the decisions of legislators and judges must be authoritative . . . to bind and protect all parties."<sup>85</sup> He referenced numerous Old and New Testament passages, but included the full text of Romans 13:1-7 in support of his conclusion that "The Bible represents human government not only as existing, but as deriving their authority and right to punish evil-doers, and to protect the righteous, from God." He seemingly concluded his analysis with a declaration of the necessity to establish and support civil authorities.<sup>86</sup>

But Finney's conclusion regarding the necessity of submission to civil authorities was not unequivocal. After a few pages, and following repeated quotation of Romans 13:2-6 and reiteration of the importance of obedience to civil authority, he subtly qualified his conclusion based on the overarching "moral government" of God. "Here the plain common-sense principle is recognized," according to Finney, "that we are to obey when the requirement is not inconsistent with the moral law, whatever may be the character or the motive of the ruler."<sup>87</sup> The

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<sup>83</sup> Charles G. Finney, "Lecture XXXVI, Human Government," in *Lectures on Systematic Theology, Embracing Moral Government, The Atonement, Moral and Physical Depravity, Natural, Moral, and Gracious Ability, Repentance, Faith, Justification, Sanctification, &c.*, ed. George Redford (London: William Tegg and Co., 1851), 351.

<sup>84</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 353. Emphasis in original.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 353-354.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 356.

college president's strong evangelical commitment to biblical authority and his inherited reliance on common-sense principles of interpretation enabled him to be confident that a clear moral boundary between obedience and refusal could be universally applied. So, despite avowing the divine authority vested in civil governments, Finney assigned "limits or boundaries of this right" based on the final arbiter of higher law. Appealing once again to Romans 13, he wrote, "Observe the end [goal, purpose] of government is the highest good of human beings, as part of universal good. All valid human legislation must propose this as its end, and no legislation can have any authority that has not the highest good of the whole for its end."<sup>88</sup> Otherwise, Finney declared, human legislation and even constitutions "are null and void, and all attempts to establish and enforce them are odious tyranny and usurpation." His fellow abolitionists could not have helped see in these words a repudiation of the authority of the U.S. Constitution's toleration of slavery. By appealing to higher law, Finney created moral space for evangelical abolitionists who would eventually appeal to violence in opposition to state and national laws protecting the institution of slavery in America.

By the mid-1850s, both national politics and events in "Bleeding Kansas" demonstrated that any appeal to force for the purpose of ending slavery would border on civil revolt. Finney's confidence that the nation would repent of its guilt also wavered as years passed and successful revivals failed to produce sweeping changes in American attitudes toward slavery. But, until the war came, he never gave up hope that revival could prevent violent conflict between the states. During his last trip to England in 1860, in response to an article in *The Christian News* (Glasgow, Scotland), Finney wrote to the editor:

But as truly as the Lord reigns, so truly shall our great revivals of religion, underlying and

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 360.

directing our political action, rid our country of this most detestable abomination. But for our revival, this sin would abolish our liberties, or we should abolish it with blood. But I trust that our revivals will work its abolition without blood, and in a manner that we will save our Union, and be honorable to the cause of God.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, Finney seems to have rejected civil revolt, if not civil disobedience, as a means to ridding America of the sin of slavery. As early as 1835 he foresaw the danger that war would pose to revivals of religion. In his *Lectures on Revivals*, he asked rhetorically, “And now suppose that war should come, where would be our revivals? How quickly would war swallow up the revival spirit? The spirit of war is anything but the spirit of revivals.”<sup>90</sup> His first and lasting anxiety about the possibility of civil war was that it distracted the attention of young men who might otherwise become zealous for the more important task of winning souls to Christ.

### **Conclusion**

It is unlikely that the formal debates at Oberlin College in 1843 resolved the question of the morality of war for all students as readily as it did for Jane B. Trew, quoted above.<sup>91</sup> But Oberlin students throughout the 1840s were certainly growing more accustomed to preaching radical abolitionism in open defiance of governmental authority. Both black and white Oberlin College women constituted a vanguard of student soldiers in the cause. Well educated African Americans like Oberlin students Sarah Kinson and Lucy Stanton motivated their classmates by their ability to commiserate with the plight of slaves and with stirring accounts of abuses by

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<sup>89</sup> Charles G. Finney to the Editor, 31 January 1860, published in *The Christian News* (Glasgow, Scotland), 4 February 1860, Library of the British Museum, trans. in The Gospel Truth, [http://www.gospeltruth.net/Finney\\_letters/finlets/finlet%201860-1864/finlet1860-01\\_31.htm](http://www.gospeltruth.net/Finney_letters/finlets/finlet%201860-1864/finlet1860-01_31.htm) (accessed January 13, 2017).

<sup>90</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals*, 288-289. For clarity, question marks were substituted for periods where appropriate by modern conventions of punctuation.

<sup>91</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 277. As an interesting aside, for example, a number of Oberlin College students and faculty—including Finney—spoke out against America’s prosecution of the Mexican War (1846-1848).

slaveholders.<sup>92</sup> Their friendship and public advocacy for slaves moved white classmate Lucy Stone to deliver her first antislavery speech at an 1846 “First of August” celebration. Abolitionist celebrations each August 1<sup>st</sup> memorialized the British emancipation of West Indian slaves in 1833. For some abolitionists, August 1<sup>st</sup> became a more fitting occasion to celebrate liberty than the American national holiday on July 4<sup>th</sup>. Combining the focus on internal transformation stressed by Finney’s revivalism with vehemence in preaching abolition, Stone argued that “public sentiment” must be transformed in order to remedy the sin of slavery. She acknowledged that “the strong arm of the law may be around systems of wrong . . . as hoary with age as with guilt,” but insisted that “the indignant frown of a virtuous public” could still overwhelm even Constitutional defenses until “they must inevitably perish.”<sup>93</sup> Stone’s speech represents once again the willingness of Oberlin students to challenge the right of civil authority in the 1840s over what they deemed by evangelical standards to be clear violations of morality. Oberlin’s African-American residents, in particular, demonstrated powerful agency via their connection to the College in ratcheting up antislavery rhetoric in response to the Ohio Fugitive Slave Law. Yet the language of black evangelical abolitionists in Oberlin, even as it grew more militant through the 1840s, usually remained vague as to whether or what physical resistance to civil authority might be acceptable to liberate those held in bondage.

Even if there was a perceptible shift in antislavery enthusiasm away from secular methods as a result of Finney’s revival influence at Oberlin College, it could have lasted, at most, barely a decade. By 1850, a national Fugitive Slave Law focused northern evangelical abolitionist ire on the federal government in ways that had previously been reserved uniquely for

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<sup>92</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 74-75.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 77 cf. 125. A temporary reluctance to advocate for abolition politically rather than “spiritually” seems to have accompanied an 1846 revival at Oberlin, but was short-lived.

the South.<sup>94</sup> Again, African Americans associated with Oberlin College provided important leadership in an escalating national debate among evangelical abolitionists about civil disobedience. In January, 1850, the Ohio Colored Citizens Convention resolved that “it is the duty of every colored man, to do everything in his power, to secure to himself and brethren, their political rights. . . . We will *fight* and *fight ever* until these privileges are *granted* to us.”<sup>95</sup> While the manner in which free blacks in the North should “fight” was by no means spelled out as anything more than bold political speech, the provisions of the Compromise of 1850 regarding fugitives would soon increase covert opposition to slavery. The manner of such opposition came primarily in the form of soliciting and helping slaves to escape their captivity along the Underground Railroad to freedom (usually in Canada).<sup>96</sup> Of course, such action would—after September, 1850, at least—be taken in defiance of the newly strengthened federal Fugitive Slave Law. For northern evangelicals, the problem with the Fugitive Slave Law was that it moved the national debate beyond legal permission for what many like Finney had come to view as a sin. Instead of merely permitting the South to continue in its “wickedness,” the law compelled others to act in cooperation with slaveholders. The law empowered marshals or their deputies “to summon and call to their aid the bystanders, or posse comitatus of the proper county, when necessary to ensure a faithful observance of the clause of the Constitution” regarding the capture of fugitive slaves, and “commanded” citizens “to aid and assist in the prompt and efficient

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<sup>94</sup> Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 130-135.

<sup>95</sup> “Minutes of the State Convention, of the Colored Citizens of Ohio, Convened at Columbus, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup>, 1850” (Columbus: Gale and Cleveland, 1850), 16, University of Delaware Library, Colored Conventions Project, <http://coloredconventions.org/files/original/d63dd203584f964cb69120e109f4d151.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2017). See also, Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 157.

<sup>96</sup> David W. Blight, ed., *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 133-173.

execution of this law.”<sup>97</sup> By commanding citizens to actively participate in the apprehension of fugitive slaves, the law gave northern evangelicals recourse to the one clear biblical exception to the New Testament’s command of submission to civil authority: demands which require the Christian to act in contradiction to the clearly revealed will of God. Evangelical abolitionists found solid textual grounds for refusal to comply with the law based in a command from the Mosaic Law (Old Testament) and in the precedent of the New Testament Apostles.<sup>98</sup> Though the Fugitive Slave Law did not immediately drive most white Oberlin evangelicals to defy civil authority, a change in evangelical attitudes and actions with regard to federal law was evident. Between 1827 and 1855, failed abolitionist reform efforts—springing from the fountain of evangelical revivals—tested the limits of evangelical submission to civil authority. Having sought unsuccessfully for nearly three decades to crush racial injustice in America by preaching the gospel of Christ and the cause of antislavery, northern evangelical abolitionists had come to the brink of civil disobedience and even violence in opposition to slavery. As will be shown in the next chapter, numbers of them found justification to openly break with the New Testament’s call to submission.

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<sup>97</sup> Henry Clay, “An Act to amend, and supplementary to, the Act entitled ‘An Act respecting Fugitives from Justice, and Persons escaping from the Service of their Masters,’ approved February twelfth, one thousand seven hundred and ninety-three,” Sec. 5, in *Transcript of Compromise of 1850*, National Archives, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=27&page=transcript>. Senator Stephen A. Douglas actually advanced the collection of bills that eventually passed as the Compromise of 1850.

<sup>98</sup> Deuteronomy 23:15, Acts 4:17-20, 29-31 and 5:27-29.

## CHAPTER 5

### Courting Political Rebellion: Northern Evangelicals Resist Federal Slave Law, 1856–1859

On Thanksgiving Day in 1855, Pastor Sherman B Canfield of the First Presbyterian Church in Syracuse, New York, preached a sermon expressing what American evangelicals had come almost universally to believe: “The most truly republican book ever written is the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> His exaggeration was characteristic of sermon literature, but, unlike many mid-century evangelicals on the subject, Canfield summarized his evidence along with the claim. “By tracing the descent of all nations to the same source,” he explained, “and declaring that they possess a common nature, made after the similitude of God . . . [the Bible] shows that the pretensions of all oppressors prating of divine right, are both absurd and impious.” Canfield went on to argue the Bible should not be considered a pro-monarchical book, as some claimed. He affirmed that Romans 13 calls Christians to submit to “the powers that be” and “discountenances” attempts to change governments by force “for light and transient causes,” but nuanced the call to submission by asserting that “it does not deny the right of revolution.” Rather, he insisted with somewhat mystifying logic, “When the people of any country for good reasons overturn one government and set up another, the very fact evinces that the former government was not a true exponent of the actual ‘powers’ of that country.”<sup>2</sup> In his treatise, Canfield went on to cite England after 1649 and America after 1776 as representative of post-revolutionary authorities who qualified as “the

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<sup>1</sup> Sherman B. Canfield, *The Indications of a Divine Purpose to Make Our Country a Model Christian Republic. A Discourse Delivered on the Day of Annual Thanksgiving, November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1854* [from old catalog] (Syracuse: Steam Power Press of T. S. Truair, 1855), 10, HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t8rb7fj2f;view=1up;seq=5> (accessed January 14, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 10-11. On the following page, Canfield commented on First Peter 2:17, asserting that Peter did not fully validate imperial Rome’s authority because he used the Greek term for “king” (τον βασιλεα), which was not used as a title for emperors until the Byzantine Era. “The apostle Peter,” Canfield wrote, “styles kings and deputies human ordinances.” But, this did not convey to the Roman emperor “*jure divino* royalism.” Rather, he argued, “The sway of the Caesars was an audacious DEMAGOGY, a thing farthest possible from an authority claimed as from God without regard to the will of the governed.” Ibid., 12.



POWERS that BE, which are ordained of God.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, he could be understood to argue that revolt was the only certain means to determine the biblical legitimacy of “the powers that be” (Romans 13:1). His effort to support both submission and revolution reveals the balancing act that strained northern evangelicals in the 1850s who found themselves increasingly at odds with the federal government’s approach to managing the tension between slavery and national unity. In the second half of the decade, northern evangelicals increasingly adopted an unswerving abolitionist stance. Some even flirted with political rebellion in order to oppose federal measures meant to solidify the Union at the expense of assuring the South that slavery would remain legal, at least in that section of the country, as the nation expanded westward.

Westward expansion had taken a significant leap in the late-1840s with the victory of the United States over Mexico in the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848 officially concluded the war. In accordance with Article V of the treaty and in consideration of fifteen million dollars paid by the United States—along with other commitments—Mexico relinquished any previous claim to Texas (annexed by the U.S. in 1845), and ceded to its northern neighbor territories that would eventually become all or part of the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada and Colorado.<sup>4</sup> More immediately, the Mexican Cession proved to be a source of political division over slavery in the 1850s that threatened to tear the nation apart. Historian David M. Potter’s study of the sectional crisis of the 1850s remains a definitive source on American politics in the decade. According to Potter, the victory over Mexico in 1848 demonstrated opposing trends in the growth of the United States. With victory came an undeniable surge in nationalism that swept northern and southern states alike.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Gray, “Teaching with Documents: The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo,” National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/guadalupe-hidalgo/> (accessed April 8, 2016); Greenberg, *Wicked War*, 238-240, 256-260.

“Manifest Destiny” was being realized with the addition of vast territory stretching to the Pacific. But, Potter also sees the cloud hanging over the celebration. He explains, “The American victory over Mexico and the acquisition of the Southwest had sealed the triumph of national expansion, but it had also triggered the release of forces of sectional dissension.”<sup>5</sup> New territories became a political battlefield on which the South’s determination to defend slavery by expanding it would clash with the North’s growing antagonism to that institution.<sup>6</sup> Actually, worse conflict would come in the mid-1850s over the status of Kansas Territory.

The decade prior to Abraham Lincoln’s election in 1860 and the outbreak of Civil War was one of sectional crisis. Flashpoints in the mounting antagonism between northern and southern states included the Compromise of 1850 with its divisive Fugitive Slave Law, the fight over slavery’s extension to the territories that became “Bleeding Kansas” after the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, Senate debate over slavery which turned violent with the caning of Charles Sumner on the floor of the Senate in 1856, northern outcries at the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision in 1857, increasingly overt abolitionist efforts to support runaway slaves such as in the case of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue in 1858, and, finally, John Brown’s shocking raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859.<sup>7</sup> The present chapter explores how northern evangelical Christians engaged with the national debate over slavery and why they increasingly justified civil disobedience and even violence in response to federal slave law during the final critical years of the 1850s.

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<sup>5</sup> Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 176. Potter rejected “cultural” as well as “rigidly applied” economic explanations for sectionalism that dismiss the centrality of slavery. Ibid., 32-33 cf. 44. See also, Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 387-388.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 198-207, 267-284, 369-371. Sources from the 1850s are divided as to the spelling of the town’s name. Some use an apostrophe and some do not. In conformity with later convention, the name will appear in this essay without an apostrophe unless it is spelled otherwise in direct citations.

Northern evangelical attitudes toward civil authority grew increasingly complicated during the 1850s, but two constants remained: a commitment to biblical authority, which had to be synchronized with any opposition to federal laws permitting the “peculiar institution,” and a desire to shape American identity in the image of Protestant evangelical Christianity. In his outstanding work on antebellum American religious history, *Catholics, Slaveholders, and the Dilemma of American Evangelicalism, 1835-1860*, W. Jason Wallace notes that “Despite efforts to define the young country as a Christian nation united in its commitment to Protestant ideals, northern evangelicals could not reconcile the place of Catholics or slaveholders in their narrative.”<sup>8</sup> He goes on to explore the difficulty American evangelicals—especially northern evangelicals—faced as they sought to make evangelical Protestant faith foundational for the country’s morality and republican political values. Although Wallace studies the dilemmas faced by evangelicals particularly at the intersection of slavery and attitudes toward American Roman Catholics, the issue of biblical interpretation regarding submission to civil authority played an equally crucial role in their struggle to define American identity.

### **Abolition and the Limits of Evangelical Submission to Civil Authority**

Four years after being forced to resign from the presidency of Oberlin College for his overbearing leadership of the faculty and for his promotion of controversial ideas about the doctrine of sanctification, Asa Mahan was still among those who made “spirited” abolitionist speeches in 1854 at meetings of the Kansas Emigrant Aid Association of Northern Ohio (AANO).<sup>9</sup> The association formed that year in Oberlin and began sending groups of emigrants to Kansas in support of its entry into the Union as a free state. A closely aligned organization, the

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<sup>8</sup> Wallace, *Dilemma of American Evangelicalism*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 175-176.

evangelical American Missionary Association, also sent Oberlin students whose intentions were to establish churches on the frontier while supporting abolitionists in Kansas. Exemplifying the latter were Oberlin seminary graduate, Samuel Adair, and his wife Florella Brown Adair, a sister of the abolitionist crusader, John Brown, who joined Oberlin alumni moving to Kansas. They, like others, were shocked at the level of violence that accompanied the dispute over slavery in the territory, not the least of which was associated with the activities of Florella's half-brother.<sup>10</sup>

The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reported an account of the dangers in Kansas given to an Oberlin audience by Kansas veteran Samuel Wood in early 1856. The details were not unlike those described by other emigrants in letters and newspapers, but the collective response was noteworthy. A critic of the free-soil emigrants was present at Woods' speech and witnessed the crowd's transformation from "non-resistant" to militant support of antislavery in Kansas.<sup>11</sup> While Morris accurately corrects the observer's interpretation of events in noting that "true nonresistance never had much traction in Oberlin," a shift toward acceptance of force to prevent the spread of slavery—if not defeat Slave Power in America—certainly increased about this time.<sup>12</sup> In response to the sack of Lawrence, Kansas, by pro-slavery elements and the caning of Senator Charles Sumner in response an antislavery speech he had given, both in May of 1856, evangelical furor rose to a fever pitch against what most considered illicit government support for slavery's extension into the new southwest territories. By the end of the month, Charles Finney, Jr., and Henry Cowles, Jr., sons of Oberlin President Charles G. Finney and Professor

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<sup>10</sup> Deborah Keating, "Adair, Florella Brown" in *Civil War on the Western Border: The Missouri-Kansas Conflict, 1854-1865*, Border War Encyclopedia, Kansas City Public Library, [www.civilwaronthewesternborder.org/content/adair-florella-brown](http://www.civilwaronthewesternborder.org/content/adair-florella-brown) (accessed April 8, 2016). Florella Adair was also a graduate of Oberlin College.

<sup>11</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), 13 February 1856, quoted in Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 177.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Henry Cowles had joined the fight for antislavery ideals in Kansas.<sup>13</sup> There is no record of President Finney explicitly stating an opinion about his namesake's participation in Kansas. But one can reasonably infer that Charles, Jr.'s father supported his extra-legal efforts, because he embarked on an apparent fundraising trip to a meeting of the National Kansas Committee in Buffalo, New York, in July of that year. According to Morris, "That convention proposed establishing state and county committees to recruit volunteers and to raise money for arms and supplies to keep the free-soilers well-equipped in the field."<sup>14</sup>

There is little doubt that students at Oberlin had been largely converted to aggressive means of battling slavery and resisting government authority where necessary. The men's society at Oberlin debated an ominous proposal before the 1856 national elections: "in case Buchanan should be elected the next president of the U.S. the free states should immediately take measures to protect their citizens in Kansas, even though they should come in conflict with the general government."<sup>15</sup> No record remains of the debate's conclusion, but the temper of the student body can be gauged by Mary Cowles' diary comments. According to this professor's wife, the senior class petitioned the faculty to let them graduate early in order to join the fight in Kanas as soon as possible. Mrs. Cowles predicted that the members of other classes would doubtless follow the senior's lead, and she earnestly prayed that "God go with them."<sup>16</sup> Her expectations regarding other classes were certainly reasonable. About the time of the national elections in November, Oberlin College sophomore, Henry Payson Kinney, exchanged correspondence with S.S.

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Cowles, *Diary*, 19 June 1856, Robert S. Fletcher Papers, Box 5, Folder 6, Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 178.

<sup>15</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 393-394.

<sup>16</sup> Cowles, *Diary*, 19 June 1856.

Burdette, a fellow student, and friend G.C. Towbridge, “a citizen of Kansas Territory.” At the end of his comments—in backward script, apparently to deter prying eyes from casually reading its seditious implications—Kinney penned, “Written in the presidency of Franklin Pierce. The slavery question will soon render this Union asunder.”<sup>17</sup> The student body continued to wrestle with volatile political subjects through debate societies, supporting a resolution during the Oberlin-Wellington crisis in 1859 to “forcibly resist the Fugitive Slave Law, henceforth and forever.” Then, shortly after the Harpers Ferry raid, students in 1860 approved by a small majority the following: “Resolved, That Jno [*sic*] Brown should have the sympathy of true friends of freedom.”<sup>18</sup> Finney had returned from a speaking tour in England shortly before the 1860 resolution was passed by a narrow margin. His qualms about Brown’s violence and the negative effect it might have on renewed revival across the country would have undoubtedly mingled with his sympathy for Brown’s determination to end slavery and the Oberlin student resolution.

The revivalist professor was certainly in no hurry to end slavery by subversion or violent means. Indeed, he wrestled for thirty years with the potential consequences of a war that he feared would come as a result of the abolitionist cause to which he was committed. For most of that time, his angst derived from thoughts of how war might quash zeal among Christian evangelists or deter sinners from paying attention to the gospel of Christ. Yet Finney vacillated as well with regard to what would precipitate war, whether bloodshed would result from God’s judgment on the sin of slavery, from the campaigning of abolitionists, or from the dullness of the churches to God’s call of revival. In *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, he queried, “What is the

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<sup>17</sup> Henry Payson Kinney, “Oberlin Nov. 7, 1856,” transcript of note, R.G. 21, Series II.A., Box 1, no. 1988/81, Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 772 cf. 769-771.

condition of this nation? No doubt, God is holding the rod of WAR over the heads of this nation. He is waiting before he lets loose his judgments, to see whether the church will do right. The nation is under his displeasure, because the church has conducted in such a manner with respect to revivals.”<sup>19</sup> The subject of impending war appeared with some regularity in his writings during his tenure at Oberlin between 1835, when he first published *Lectures on Revivals*, and 1865, when he remarked with hopefulness on the postwar class of veterans at the college.<sup>20</sup> But, along with many other Americans, Finney grew increasingly anxious about the grave crisis of the nation in the final decade before South Carolina led southern states in secession and fired on Fort Sumter, marking the end of uncertainty and the beginning of war.

At a number of points in his life, Finney expressed an optimistic hope that the transforming effect of revival in throngs of converts across the country might change the course of the South’s defense of its “peculiar institution” and stave off war. Such revival, he believed, must begin in the churches, where false “professors” of religion mixed with true believers and where both categories of “Christians” turned deaf ears to the plight of slaves. Finney envisioned a preventative program centered in revival of religion:

See now, how this nation is, *all at once*, brought upon the brink of war. God brandishes his blazing sword over our heads. Will the church repent? It is THE CHURCH that God chiefly has in view. How shall we avoid the curse of war? Only by a reformation in the church. It is in vain to look to politicians to avert war. Perhaps they would generally be in favor of war. Very likely the things they would do to avert it would run us right into it. If the church will not feel, will not awake, will not act, where shall we look for help? If the church absolutely *will not* move, will not tremble in view of the just judgments of God hanging over our heads, we are certainly nigh unto cursing, as a nation.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals*, 288. Emphasis in original.

<sup>20</sup> Finney to Weld, 21 July 1836; Charles G. Finney to John Moody, 1 November 1865, Finney Papers, Oberlin College Archives. Finney had actually retired from the presidency of Oberlin in 1865 at age 73, but continued to teach pastoral theology as his health permitted until just before his death in 1875.

<sup>21</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals*, 289. It should be noted that this section was included in the 1835 edition. Emphasis original.

Again, in a crucial letter to Weld the next year, the revivalist lobbied for more emphasis on evangelism and less on abolitionist political activism: “Nothing is more manifest to me, than that the present movements will result in this [war] unless our mode of abolitionizing the country be greatly modified.”<sup>22</sup> Instead, as a means of effecting emancipation without the country resorting to war, Finney pled for renewed vigor in evangelistic revivals. The abolitionist cause, he asserted, was “upon the conscience of every man, so that now every new convert will be an Abolitionist of course. Now if Abolition can be made an appendage of a general revival of religion all is well.”<sup>23</sup> By the late-1850s, notwithstanding the undeniable antislavery influence of the spread of the 1857-1858 “New York Prayer Revival,” all could not have been considered “well” by Finney’s standard. Instead, the cause of abolition among northern evangelicals, even at Oberlin, had come to be largely separated from religious revival. For many evangelicals, the loss of hope in revival as a means to accomplish abolition also brought an increased willingness to resist civil authority to defeat Slave Power. And for some, resistance even implied the right to use violence as an alternate and more effective means to accomplish that end.

From England in 1859, Finney learned that twenty-five years of worry were apparently materializing even before the war began. Students at Oberlin College were more exercised to engage in the cause of abolition than in the cause of revival. Indeed, within the year three former students from Oberlin (one black) would participate in the raid on Harpers Ferry with John Brown. The freedman died from wounds received and the other two were subsequently hanged.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Finney to Weld, 21 July 1836.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., *“Fire from the Midst of You”: A Religious Life of John Brown* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 258, 265-266.



Even before these events, however, Finney wrote to fellow Oberlin professor, Henry Cowles of his anxiety over what the political situation was doing to the spiritual condition of the school: “No one has written me of any special religious interest there. This oppresses me. I have no hope for Oberlin if their zeal for the conversion of souls & the sanctification of believers abates & subsides. . . . But my fears on this head are oppressive. I cannot tell you how much I fear or how much I feel on this point.”<sup>25</sup> Perhaps Finney had been kept in the dark deliberately, while preaching abroad, by colleagues who feared to tell him the full truth of Oberlin College students’ distraction from the work of revival to pursue the cause of abolition by more aggressive means.

Morris is more cautious than earlier historians, such as Robert S. Fletcher, about assigning to Oberlin’s antislavery advocates full commitment to revolt against civil authority seeking to execute federal slave laws, but he acknowledges the exceptional quality of Oberlin’s abolitionists compared to other antislavery activists. “Though Oberlin was but a part of a vast network of participants who will never be known,” he concludes, “the relatively well-documented involvement of its townspeople in the Underground Railroad demonstrated its fundamentally practical and independent approach to abolitionism, as well as the vital importance of African Americans in the great freedom struggle.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, black students at Oberlin College played a crucial role in moving evangelical abolitionists toward civil disobedience in resistance to the Ohio Fugitive Slave Act of 1839. By September, 1848, Oberlin alumni John and Charles Langston, William Howard Day, J. M. Jones and John M. Brown helped organize the National Colored Citizens Convention on antislavery and equal rights for freemen. According to Morris, these black leaders at Oberlin and at a statewide Convention in

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<sup>25</sup> Charles G. Finney to Henry Cowles, 15 March 1859, Finney Papers, 30/27, Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 188; Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 399.

January, 1849, “hoped to push African Americans nationally toward an endorsement of physical resistance against the Slave Power in the North and South.”<sup>27</sup> This represented a recent change in attitude for northern free blacks. Until the late-1840s, most African-American abolitionists still pursued their goals under the banner of Garrisonian pacifism. The leadership of Ohio’s Colored Citizens Convention marked a significant turn among northern evangelicals toward resistance of civil authorities in opposition to slavery. They urged their fellows in northern states to remain alert for any appearance of “men-thieves [i.e., slave catchers] and their abettors,” and when found to warn them in no uncertain terms that no free or fugitive blacks would be claimed by them “without trouble.” Morris contextualizes well, noting, “This was not the old nonresistant strategy of relying on surrogates (the slaves themselves) to use violence to implement their goals, but a clear step toward accepting violence as a legitimate means to encourage emancipation.”<sup>28</sup> Overall, the contributions of Oberlin College’s evangelical faculty and students to rescuing slaves in violation of state or federal law during the two decades prior to the Civil War (1861-1865) were considerable. Southern slave catchers and even judges on both sides of the Ohio River attested their involvement.

Assisting those fleeing bondage was particularly encouraged among Oberlin alumni who journeyed elsewhere to do “the Lord’s work” in the 1850s. Their combining of religious and social agendas merited blame in the eyes of critics, but was unremarkable to those associated with Oberlin College. According to Fletcher, “Wherever a former Oberlin student might live there was likely to be a station on the Underground Railroad.”<sup>29</sup> For example, Florella Brown

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<sup>27</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 149 cf. 157.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 150 cf. 282, n. 94.

<sup>29</sup> Fletcher, *History of Oberlin College*, 398.

Adair and her husband helped John Brown to liberate eleven slaves from Missouri on Christmas Eve in 1858.<sup>30</sup> James Ellis, an early commentator on Oberlin's role in events leading to the Civil War, observed that most of Oberlin's participants in the struggle for Kansas were unique, but for their methods rather than their goal of freeing slaves. Along with their opposition to the institution of slavery, they promoted racial equality, hardly the norm among antislavery activists in the North. Moreover, he wrote, they preferred persuasion to compulsion, appealing "first with the Bible and [only] when that failed, with Sharpe's rifle."<sup>31</sup> He may have under-reported the violent role of Oberlin College men in association with John Brown both in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry, but his characterization remains valid and demonstrates the influence of biblical authority on northern evangelicals relative to other northern free soil proponents.

The open defiance of the Adair's to the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) and the Dred Scott Decision (1857) reflected more than their familial ties to Brown, for they were also in step with other evangelical graduates of what critics called "the activist training school" in Oberlin. Student Amos Dresser graduated from Oberlin College in 1839 and went on to serve briefly as a missionary and abolitionist lecturer in addition to his long service pastoring several Congregational churches. In the mid-1850s, he became recording secretary of the Conference of Congregational Churches of Northeastern Ohio.<sup>32</sup> Shortly after the Supreme Court's Dred Scott

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<sup>30</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 195.

<sup>31</sup> J. M. Ellis, *Oberlin and the American Conflict: An Address Delivered before the Alumni of Oberlin College, at their Re-union, Wednesday, Aug. 23, 1865* (Oberlin: News Office, 1865), 6, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/oberlinamericanc00elli> (accessed January 13, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Delaven L. Leonard, ed., *Papers of the Ohio Church History Society*, vol. 4 (Oberlin: Press of the Oberlin Record, 1893), 33, HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100450831> (accessed January 14, 2017). The original name of the Conference given here was changed in 1859 to "Plymouth Rock Conference." From its founding in 1848, the Conference invited "evangelical Congregational churches" to join and send lay representatives to annual meetings. Ibid., 31. Volumes I-IV are combined in the HathiTrust digital print obtained from a hardbound copy at Harvard Library. The pagination is difficult to follow. Readers are urged to pay close attention to the volume number when referencing the page number cited here.

decision in March 1857, Dresser put forward a resolution that directly addressed the principle of submission to civil authority from Romans 13 in connection with the Conference's abolitionist stance. His resolution began by acknowledging the claims of Romans 13:1, "the powers that be are ordained of God," and 13:4, "[the civil magistrate] is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." But, based on its recent decision, Dresser declared that the Supreme Court had now become a purveyor of "unrighteous decrees," and, as a result, "enforces unrighteous decisions and wields the sword to oppress the innocent instead of protecting them." Thus, he argued, by undermining this fundamental tenet of good governance found in Romans 13:3-4, the Supreme Court had become "the minister of Satan instead of the minister of God, and can no longer rightfully claim our respect for his person, his mandates, or his decisions." The resolution was passed by the representatives of the Conference. It concluded with the admission, "That by acquiescing in this decision we should justly expose ourselves to the scorn and contempt of the civilized world and the displeasure of a Holy God."<sup>33</sup> While vague in its direction as to what form such refusal to "acquiesce" might take, the intent of the resolution was clear: evangelical abolitionists were free from obedience to civil authority in the case of fugitive slaves. Thus, using language and reasoning similar to northern evangelicals who justified revolt against Great Britain in the 1770s, an influential segment of northern evangelicals in the 1850s came to justify civil disobedience in resistance to the institution of American slavery.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Leonard, ed., *Papers of the Ohio Church History Society*, vol. 4, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Chapter 1 of the current study analyzes Revolutionary Era northern evangelical justifications of the revolt against British rule in the American Colonies.

The Oberlin-Wellington Rescue on September 13, 1858, evidenced the lengths to which northern evangelical abolitionists of Dresser's ilk were prepared to go in such resistance. The black population of Oberlin, Ohio, grew by almost 300 percent during the 1850s. According to Morris, the majority of these could have been considered fugitives, drawn by the perceived safety of the town's commitment to antislavery and social equality as much as by its ready access to Lake Erie's route to freedom in Canada.<sup>35</sup> As part of a conservative backlash to the economic downturn of 1857—which occurred on the Republicans' watch in Ohio—largely pro-slavery Democrats unexpectedly gained control in the following session of the Ohio legislature. Their victory emboldened them to believe they could reverse protections for Ohio's black population that had been enacted under Republican rule.<sup>36</sup> The danger of recapture under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 increased for Ohio's blacks.

Oberlin's reputation with regard to fugitive slaves was twofold. First, fugitives knew the town and its white and black population to be perhaps the best refuge for escaped slaves in America in 1858. Indeed, Morris points out that “no slave catcher was ever successful in returning a man or woman back to slavery from Oberlin.”<sup>37</sup> Second, agents of those whose slaves had escaped knew the town to be a likely hiding place and a potentially profitable location to seek fugitives. In 1858, one such slave catcher, Anderson Jennings, came to Oberlin from Kentucky looking for a particular fugitive, but in the failed attempt spotted another former slave,

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<sup>35</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 164 cf. 194. In addition to other sources cited below, the author recommends Nat Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990); Jacob R. Shipherd, *History of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue* (Boston: John J. Jewett, 1859); and *An Account of the Trials of Simeon Bushnell and Charles Langston by the Oberlin-Wellington Rescuers, recorded at the Cuyahoga County Jail*, 12 May 1859, Oberlin College Archives, [http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/Oberlin-Wellington\\_Rescue/trial\\_account.htm](http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/Oberlin-Wellington_Rescue/trial_account.htm) (accessed May 30, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 185.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

John Price, who had escaped earlier that year from a neighbor of his. He immediately secured the necessary legal right of the former owner to claim Price on his behalf and gathered a few pro-slavery locals (i.e., Democrats) to assist in the capture. Lured out of town by an offer of work on a nearby farm, Price was taken prisoner and hurried toward a nearby train depot at Wellington for transport to Columbus and then back to Kentucky. Unfortunately for the slave catchers, two Oberlin College students happened to pass the wagon in which Price was being transported and carried news of the abduction back to Oberlin. Immediately, the town's abolitionist residents (black and white) began to load firearms and gather horses, wagons and carriages to chase Price and his abductors across the ten miles of open countryside to Wellington. Shortly, hundreds of Oberlin residents had arrived and surrounded the hotel in which Jennings and his men held Price. After several attempts at negotiation failed, two groups of rescuers—one led by college students and the other by free blacks—attacked the defenders of the hotel, forcing their way at two entry points, and gathered outside the attic room in which Price was held. By evening, Price had been freed and jubilant Oberlinites were streaming back to their home town. Price was then hidden in the attic of Oberlin College Professor James Fairchild's house until he could be safely transported to Canada. Fortunately, no one was fatally injured in the successful rescue, but the effort had involved a serious defiance of civil authority, carried out mostly by evangelical abolitionists.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike his brother, Charles, John Mercer Langston had been absent from Oberlin on a legal matter when the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue occurred, but he arrived back in town just before the rescuers returned. "Even without knowing all the facts of the case," Morris

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 208-211, 213.

summarizes, “the young [black] lawyer easily realized the gravity of the situation.”<sup>39</sup> He rightly assessed that the government could not delay in forcefully responding to such defiance of federal law. Thirty-seven formal indictments were delivered by the U.S. marshal on December 7, 1858, including some to individuals like John Langston and Oberlin Professor Henry Peck who had not been present at the rescue, though they probably approved. When faced with summons to appear in court on felony charges for their resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law in the rescue of Price, even those who had not been present, but had been served with indictments anyway, agreed voluntarily to face the court. “Following the example of Christ,” Morris astutely recognizes, “they were fully prepared to face the legal consequences for violating laws that they believed were immoral.”<sup>40</sup> This observation is significant for two reasons. First, because it implies, though without directly referencing, the concept of “higher law” that animated the abolitionists’ revolt against federal law. Higher law theory asserts that when the laws of a nation prevent citizens from doing good or when the law punishes the righteous but fails to bring the genuinely guilty to justice, even religious people are relieved of responsibility to obey those laws. Oberlin rescuers demonstrated by their actions and willingness to stand trial that they believed there was a higher law than that of the U.S. government to which they had been faithful.<sup>41</sup> But Morris’s observation is significant for a second reason, because it indicates that Oberlin’s evangelical abolitionists were still conscious of their responsibility before civil authorities. Instead of obeying the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 212; John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol or The First and Only Negro Representative in Congress from the Old Dominion* (1894; repr., Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968), 184-185.

<sup>40</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 215.

<sup>41</sup> “[William H.] Seward’s ‘higher law’ doctrine [in the 1850 debate over slavery] would be familiar to nineteenth-century American evangelicals who believed Peter’s order ‘to obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5:29).” Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 67. See also, Carwardine’s fine summary of evangelical reactions to Seward’s “higher law” speech of 11 March 1850 in the Senate, in Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 177-178.

requirements of civil law, however, they sought to demonstrate submission through cooperation with the legal system and its judgment for their disobedience.

Despite being held more than thirty-five miles distant in Cleveland, the trial attracted wide attention and was well-attended by residents of Oberlin who had not been indicted. Those facing charges were imprisoned alongside common criminals to await trial. That those being held were conscious of their principled stand on the basis of higher law was evident in a report in the *Cleveland Daily Herald* on April 30, 1859. It claimed that an unnamed member of the Wellington-Oberlin prisoners wrote from jail and “classified” those incarcerated at the time: “Horse thief, 1; counterfeiting, 1; murder, 1; drunkenness, 1; assault and battery, 1; grand larceny, 7; petit larceny, 8; burglary, 3; and believing in the higher law, 20.”<sup>42</sup> Twelve of the indictments handed out by a federal grand jury dominated by pro-slavery Democrats were to African Americans. Ohio’s Republican authorities showed their displeasure with federal interference in what they considered to be a state matter by actually arresting the federal marshal and several others associated with Price’s capture. After a negotiated settlement with the federal government, the state released those it had detained in exchange for most of the Oberlin indictments being dropped. Only two of the rescuers, Simeon Bushnell (white) and Charles

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<sup>42</sup> “The Classification,” *Cleveland Daily Herald* 25 (Cleveland, OH), 30 April 1859: 2, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918590430%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C40%29%22Cleveland+Daily+Herald+%28Cleveland%2C+Oh%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchId=R1&docId=GT3005055073&currentPosition=1&currentPosition=1&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3005055073&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&dp=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&scale=0.33&pageIndex=2&orientation=&docPage=page&enlarge=&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&specialIssues=&shipname=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=2807](http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918590430%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C40%29%22Cleveland+Daily+Herald+%28Cleveland%2C+Oh%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R1&docId=GT3005055073&currentPosition=1&currentPosition=1&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3005055073&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&dp=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&scale=0.33&pageIndex=2&orientation=&docPage=page&enlarge=&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&specialIssues=&shipname=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=2807) (accessed January 15, 2017).



Langston (black), eventually stood trial.<sup>43</sup> The most impressive speech given during the trials—and later widely circulated in pamphlet form—was delivered by Langston. It also exhibited a commitment to higher law, though with a less-than-submissive attitude toward civil authority. Morris summarizes the passionate defense of abolition in which Langston declared that he would always “fall back upon those last defenses of our rights which cannot be taken from us, and which God gave us, that we need not be slaves,” and concluded that the authorities should take notice that American blacks would no longer be “meekly submitting to the penalties of an infamous law.”<sup>44</sup> The prosecutor at the Wellington Rescue trial understood from the start the rescuers’ central justification to be founded on a theory of higher law. In his opening statement, he bitterly complained:

This Oberlin ‘higher law’—which I call ‘Devil’s law’—as interpreted by the Oberlin saints, is just what makes every man’s conscience his criterion as to right or wrong. The true ‘higher law’ is the law of the country in which we exist, and there would be no safety for the whole world or community, a perfect hell upon earth would prevail, if this Law was carried out. It gives all to the black man, but the devil take the white man! It places no constraint upon any human being, save his own free will, and takes all power from the law.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless of his obvious racism, he was well-aware that he must make a moral and religious as well as legal argument. In Garrison’s antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, William Nell and Lewis Hayden connected Charles Langston’s Wellington Rescue Trial speech to what they called “this second revolution for liberty in the United States.”<sup>46</sup> As this quote from a Garrisonian

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<sup>43</sup> Roland Baumann, *The 1858 Oberlin-Wellington Rescue: A Reappraisal* (Oberlin: Oberlin College, 2003), 40-42.

<sup>44</sup> Morris, *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*, 216.

<sup>45</sup> “A ‘Professional’ Blackguard,” *Liberator* 29 (Boston, MA), 29 April 1859: 65, Fair Use Repository, <http://fair-use.org/the-liberator/1859/04/29/the-liberator-29-17.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2017).

<sup>46</sup> “Oberlin Rescuers: Meeting of Colored Citizens of Boston,” *Liberator* 29 (Boston, MA), 10 June 1859: 90, Fair Use Repository, <http://fair-use.org/the-liberator/1859/06/10/the-liberator-29-23.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2017).

viewpoint demonstrates, evangelicals were certainly not alone among religious Americans in attesting the precedence of higher law in reference to social relations. But the growing acceptance by northern evangelicals in the 1850s of the theological premise that higher law was not coterminous with biblical law had a profound effect on their willingness to participate in acts of civil disobedience, if not violence, in the cause of abolition.

### **John Brown (1800-1859) Crosses the Line to Open Rebellion**

John Brown's incursion against southern slavery began on a Sunday evening in October 1859, and merits special attention as the pinnacle of abolitionist willingness to oppose slavery in defiance of federal authority. Brown's stated plan called for the raiders to capture several buildings comprising the armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, as well as bridges over the Potomac River that offered access to points south. During a brief stay, they would gather weapons, powder and shot from the immense stockpile stored there, wait for dissident whites and mutinous slaves from the surrounding area to join them, and then move rapidly southward, liberating and arming slaves.<sup>47</sup> Historian David Finkelman notes that the twenty-one men with Brown "made a strange assortment: veterans of the struggles in Kansas, fugitive slaves, free blacks, transcendental idealists, Oberlin college men, and youthful abolitionists on their first foray into the world."<sup>48</sup> The first part of the plan was executed smoothly. Brown divided his small force of twenty-one men, cut the telegraph wires, secured all the initial objectives and gathered a handful of hostages, freeing and arming their bewildered slaves. Then, the group waited for rebellious slaves and white supporters that never came. The residents of the town and nearby farms

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<sup>47</sup> Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 278.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 7.

organized quickly and with a vengeance Brown did not seem to have expected. Militia and federal troops gathered by Monday afternoon and surrounded what was left of Brown's meager assault force. Any hope of escape for Brown and his men was gone. By nightfall, Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee was in command of all federal forces and the Harpers Ferry raid ended Tuesday morning, October 18, with a bayonet charge by twelve marines. In three days, fifteen lives were lost: four townspeople, one marine and ten of Brown's men. Brown was wounded and captured along with six of the raiders. Five escaped, at least for the time being.<sup>49</sup>

Everything about the audacious raid on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry invited critique. Each phase, from planning to preparation to execution(s) aroused astonishment and summoned shocked Americans in both sections of the increasingly polarized country to plum its meaning and the likely consequences for national unity. An evangelical abolitionist had acted on his radical convictions and, in utter disregard of federal and state authority, had led an assault on the South calculated to provoke a violent insurrection and bring about the end of American slavery. Most, at first, considered him to be a religious fanatic and probably insane. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, one of the deans of Southern History, claims that "every generation of historians must wrestle with the meaning of this event and John Brown's relationship to the coming of the Civil War. Combining the highest of ideals with ruthless deeds, Brown's behavior has aroused a confused mixture of admiration and condemnation."<sup>50</sup> But, from the time of the raid, Brown's reputation among African Americans has never been in much doubt. Although his attack did not

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<sup>49</sup> Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 369-371. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 290-301.

<sup>50</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "'A Volcano Beneath a Mountain of Snow': John Brown and the Problem of Interpretation," in Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 10. Another historian recently asserted that "Indeed, Brown may be as salient to an understanding of the nineteenth century as he has ever been since his execution a century and a half ago." W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "John Brown: The Stone in the Historian's Shoe," *The Journal of the Historical Society* 12 (March 2012): 80.

provoke the anticipated uprising of local slaves, he was quickly enshrined as a hero and deliverer in the estimation of the black community. After the war began, northern whites adopted him as a martyr as well.

The copious literature on John Brown and his ill-fated raid on Harpers Ferry is replete with analyses of radical abolitionism within the broader scope of nineteenth-century antislavery agitation and the coming of the Civil War. To a lesser extent, scholars have sought to explain the complex relationship between Brown's religious motivations and his violent deeds in support of the abolitionist cause.<sup>51</sup> Some have given attention to a wide range of northern and southern reactions to Brown's raid and its consequences.<sup>52</sup> What has not entered the discourse, however, is a clear depiction of how northern evangelical Christians—an influential group among abolitionists—assessed the raid based on their understanding of the relationship between radical abolitionism and the New Testament teaching of submission to civil authority. Brown's raid was not only violent, it was treasonous. His actions took the arguments for immediate abolition of slavery to their logical and—ultimately—violent end. Because slavery was permitted by the U.S. Constitution, the assault also brought to a head debates among northern Christians about the ethical justification of civil disobedience in pursuit of ending the “peculiar institution.”

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<sup>51</sup> For example, see DeCaro, *Religious Life of John Brown*. DeCaro's biographical study emphasizes the importance of religion in John Brown's life, but even this work does not concentrate on Brown's religious thought as much as the title suggests. Instead, DeCaro explains the linkage between Brown's violence and his understanding of religious justification.

<sup>52</sup> Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 8. Finkelman's excellent collection of essays “illuminate[s] the range of responses across the nation and in Europe to Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, his imprisonment and trial, and his execution.” None of the contributors, however, isolate religious responses let alone identify them in a way that carefully differentiates Northern evangelical assessments from other religious responses.

Evangelical Christianity made up a higher percentage of American Christianity in the nineteenth century than in the twentieth century.<sup>53</sup> This was certainly so during the period following the height of revivals of the Second Great Awakening from the 1820s through the 1840s and before the uptick in religious rationalism and scientific Darwinism in the decades following the Civil War.<sup>54</sup> Though predominant among American Protestants by the mid-1800s, they did not consistently apply the term, evangelical, in order to distinguish themselves from other Christians. Consequently, the problem of identifying the religious views of specific individuals as either evangelical or non-evangelical remains vexing in a nineteenth-century American context. This may account for the usual absence of such distinctions in academic analyses of responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry raid.<sup>55</sup> In this chapter, therefore, care has been taken to identify the religious persuasion of those discussed, using the definition and identification methods described in the Introduction.

Attempts to arrive at a clear picture of northern evangelical perspectives on the raid in light of their understandings of biblical teaching on submission to civil authority are complicated further by divisions within antislavery ranks. By the 1840s, so-called “immediatists” on the question of slave emancipation had grown tired of waiting for a gradual, culturally and economically driven departure from the South’s commitment to slave labor.<sup>56</sup> They were mostly

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<sup>53</sup> Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion*, xii. The prominence of evangelical Christianity in American society during the nineteenth century is generally recognized among historians. See, for example, Butler, Wacker, and Balmer, *Religion in American Life*, 169, 171.

<sup>54</sup> Darwin did not publish his intellectually earth-shaking treatise, *On the Origin of the Species*, until 1859, the year of John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry.

<sup>55</sup> Although well written and informative, Finkelman’s collection of essays, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, exemplifies the tendency not to differentiate between evangelicals and other religious opponents of slavery.

<sup>56</sup> A. Glenn Crothers, “‘To Bear our Righteous Testimonies against All Evil’: Virginia Quakers’ Response to John Brown,” *Quaker History* 100 (Fall 2011): 1. “Quakers stood at the forefront of the gradualist antislavery

religiously motivated and called for immediate emancipation to address the pressing evil of human bondage.<sup>57</sup> “Gradualists” continued to believe that slavery was a doomed institution and that ongoing political and legal attempts to dismantle it would eventually succeed. They shared with other opponents of slavery an intense concern to prevent the spread of slavery in new territories acquired after the Mexican-American War (1846-1848).<sup>58</sup> Gradualists generally coupled their efforts to end slavery with offers to reimburse slaveholders financially and send former slaves back to Africa, an effort promoted by the Colonization Society. Historians John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay argue that the influence of evangelical Christianity on the growth of abolitionism was significant, but more nuanced than the classic work by Gilbert Barnes portrayed. “To a large extent,” they write, “the acceptance of abolitionism by a particular religious body seems to be correlated with its position on certain broader theological issues.”<sup>59</sup> Salient to this study are the doctrines of submission to civil authority and higher law. Using the common moniker, abolitionist, to describe advocates of immediate emancipation, I argue that the raid on Harpers Ferry influenced more evangelicals to move from a gradualist to an immediatist position as a result of Brown’s persuasive application of a higher law theory, which had already gained currency in evangelical theological discourse.

Abolitionists also differed among themselves over the means of bringing about immediate emancipation, with many advocating pacifist agitation and some (notably William

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movement before 1830, and their activist members remained persistent opponents of slavery and advocates of racial justice even when abolitionists embracing immediatism displaced them as the nation’s leading antislavery activists.”

<sup>57</sup> Gilbert Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1933). Although older, this work remains essential regarding the shift within the American antislavery movement to immediatism. See also, David B. Chesebrough, *“God Ordained This War”: Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830-1865*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>58</sup> Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 16-17, 29-43.

<sup>59</sup> McKivigan and Snay, eds., *Antebellum Debate*, 10. Cf. 6, 11.

Lloyd Garrison) calling for more radical measures, including disunion to separate from southern slave society. Even in the late-1850s, very few openly promoted the militant overthrow of the South's system of labor, and those who did generally emphasized the importance of slave-initiative and agency. Northern evangelicals were strongly represented among abolitionists, yet little has been written that explores how these Christians processed the violent application of immediatist principles at Harpers Ferry with regard to religious attitudes toward civil authority. It is at this crucial juncture of politics, religion, abolition and violence that the present chapter seeks a fuller understanding of John Brown's raid in its intellectual and cultural context.

John Brown seemed to defy categorization for nineteenth-century American Protestants who were divided, but orderly, for the most part, in their religious persuasions. Brown was neither orderly nor consistent in his religion. Historians have also wrestled with how to categorize Brown's religious identity, typically defaulting to oft-repeated but at times enigmatic impressions left by those who met Brown in the months and years before Harpers Ferry and wrote of their impressions.<sup>60</sup> The evidence in these sources is, indeed, essential to understand how Brown's religious bearing impacted his decision to launch an attack on the South, as are the reflections of Brown, himself, on the subject of religion. Both endure as the most reliable sources of interpretation concerning the character, faith and motivations of the man contemporaries often called, "Old Brown."

That Brown was deeply religious was obvious to everyone he met or even to whom he wrote. His correspondence was liberally peppered with Christian terminology and sentiments of devotion to the will of God. On February 20, 1858, Brown was staying in Peterboro, New York, with the wealthy abolitionist, Gerrit Smith. Smith was a member of the "Secret Six" who morally

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<sup>60</sup> DeCaro, *Religious Life of John Brown*. DeCaro stands in contrast to this historiographical generalization.

and materially supported Brown's militant abolitionism. Brown wrote from there to his son, John, "I will say (in the language of another), in regard to this most encouraging fact, 'My soul doth magnify the Lord.' I seem to be almost marvelously helped; and to His name be praise!"<sup>61</sup> When the young Brown devotee, F. B. Sanborn, joined the group a few days later, discussion turned to details of Brown's intended southern incursion against slavery. Objections were raised, but according to Sanborn, "Every difficulty had been foreseen and provided against in some manner; the grand difficulty of all—the manifest hopelessness of undertaking anything so vast with such slender means—was met with the text of Scripture: 'If God be for us, who can be against us?'"<sup>62</sup> Whether or not Sanborn—writing years later—exaggerated the challenges to Brown's plan at this early meeting, the use of Scripture smacks of typical John Brown bravado. In a letter sometime later to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Unitarian minister in Massachusetts and another member of the "Secret Six," Brown defended the anticipated delay of his foray into the slaveholding South. He assuaged Higginson's anxious disappointment at putting off the expedition by quoting from a well-known piece of Old Testament wisdom literature: "In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths."<sup>63</sup> These few examples demonstrate the general validity of historian Paul Finkelman's summary of how Brown would have been perceived by compatriots: "John Brown was in many ways like his fellow abolitionists. He quoted the Bible they knew and loved. Although his personal theology may have been a bit idiosyncratic, and unorthodox, he believed in a living God who would soon

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<sup>61</sup> F. B. Sanborn, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, vol. 1 (1909; repr., Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1967), 144. Brown's "language of another" is that of Mary, the mother of Jesus, quoted from Luke 1:46.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 146. Quote is from Romans 8:31.

<sup>63</sup> John Brown to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 14 May 1858, Higginson Papers, Boston Public Library. Quote is from Proverbs 3:6. For a brief list and religious characterization of the "Secret Six," see Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 158.



intervene on behalf of justice.”<sup>64</sup> But can more be said to clarify the faith of this deeply religious and militant activist? To what extent and in what ways was Brown “idiosyncratic”? And, was he indeed fundamentally “unorthodox” in his Christianity, as Finkelman asserts? A more precise understanding of Brown’s faith will not only shed light on his decision to attempt the violent overthrow of legal slavery in the United States, but will also help explain why many northern evangelicals, following initial shock, responded to his actions with admiration.

With regard to Protestant orthodoxy, it is wrong to label Brown as other than traditional. In fact, Brown identified with a long tradition of orthodox Calvinism. In the peculiar manner of speaking about himself in third person, Brown wrote a brief autobiographical account to Henry L. Stearns in 1857. Stearns was Brown’s most reliable and generous financial supporter among the “Secret Six,” and the letter was intended to aid his benefactor in soliciting others to bankroll the cause. The letter contained a conversion narrative that would have been commonly recognizable to generations of orthodox Calvinists. In his own words:

John had been taught from earliest childhood to “fear God & keep his commandments;” & though quite skeptical he had always by turns felt much serious doubt as to his future well being; & about this time became to some extent a convert to Christianity & ever after a firm believer in the divine authenticity of the Bible. With this book he became very familiar, & possessed a most unusual memory of its entire contents.<sup>65</sup>

Though the exact date of this experience is not clear in Brown’s chronology, it is known that his formal profession of faith was accepted by the Congregational Church of Hudson, Ohio, where he was admitted to membership at the age of sixteen.<sup>66</sup> Such an account of personal religious

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<sup>64</sup> Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 58.

<sup>65</sup> John Brown to Henry L. Stearns, 15 July 1857, Faculty Projects, University of Missouri at Kansas City under “Brown on Brown: John Brown’s Autobiographical Letter to Henry Stearns,” <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/johnbrown/browntohenrystearns.html> (accessed April 4, 2012). See also DeCaro, *Religious Life of John Brown*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 13.

history would have been familiar and unremarkable to a large segment of evangelical Christians in the nineteenth century.

There is no indication that Brown ever repudiated his conversion to Christ or confidence in the authority of the Bible (key components of orthodox evangelical faith).<sup>67</sup> On the contrary, by his own testimony and that of others who knew him, Brown lived—albeit with dramatic, if momentary, inconsistencies—a pious evangelical life right up until the time of his execution. In the immediate aftermath of his capture at Harpers Ferry, while being interrogated by military and civilian authorities, the wounded man testified that the “golden rule” of Christ motivated him to “help others gain their liberty.” This was too much, apparently, for Lieutenant J.E.B. Stewart who stood listening nearby. “But you don’t believe in the Bible,” the indignant Southerner blurted out. “Certainly I do,” Brown retorted.<sup>68</sup> His closest family and acquaintances agreed. Former Professor of History at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Benjamin Quarles, states that “A week before her husband’s hanging Mrs. Brown informed an interviewer, Theodore Tilton, that the ‘religious element of [her husband’s] character was always the ruling motive of his life.’”<sup>69</sup> One might consider this to be the testimony either of the closest witness to John Brown’s true character or else, perhaps, an overly generous assessment given by a desperate wife

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<sup>67</sup> DeCaro, *Religious Life of John Brown*, 89. DeCaro’s argument for Brown’s lifelong commitment to evangelical theology is compelling.

<sup>68</sup> “The Harper’s Ferry Outbreak,” *New York Herald* 24 (New York, NY), 21 October 1859: 1, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/news/paperRetrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DateAscend&tabID=T003&prodId=NCNP&resultListType=RESU LT\\_LIST&searchId=R3&searchType=PublicationSearchForm&currentPosition=9&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591021%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22New+York+Herald+%28New+York%2C+NY%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&userGroupName=ksu&inPS=true&contentSet=LTO&&docId=&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3003656667&pageIndex=1&pubMcode=5AJW&contentSet=UDVIN&callistoContentSet=UDVIN&docPage=page&tabLimiterIndex=&tabLimiterValue=&previousPage=page](http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/news/paperRetrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DateAscend&tabID=T003&prodId=NCNP&resultListType=RESU LT_LIST&searchId=R3&searchType=PublicationSearchForm&currentPosition=9&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591021%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22New+York+Herald+%28New+York%2C+NY%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&userGroupName=ksu&inPS=true&contentSet=LTO&&docId=&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3003656667&pageIndex=1&pubMcode=5AJW&contentSet=UDVIN&callistoContentSet=UDVIN&docPage=page&tabLimiterIndex=&tabLimiterValue=&previousPage=page) (accessed April 19, 2012).

<sup>69</sup> Benjamin Quarles, *Blacks on John Brown* (1972; repr., Cambridge: De Capo Press, 2001), xiii.

trying to save the life of her husband. But she was hardly the only family member to corroborate Brown's religious devotion. A letter from Kansas about a month after the hanging provided evidence for the assailant's religious reputation. Sarah Everett replied to "Dear Jennie" regarding the news from Virginia:

You are enquiring what is the feeling here in regard to John Brown's surprise party in Virginia. It has caused a good deal of feeling here—I should not think that *excitement* is exactly the word to characterize the feeling *here*—Brown was intimately known in these parts and greatly loved by the Free state men here. . . . Mr. Adair [Brown's brother-in-law] said he was a man that had always been from his childhood impressed with the idea that God had raised him up on purpose to break the jaws of the wicked. Perhaps I have mentioned before that Mr. Adair is the Congregational Miss[ionary] Minister of this place—a most worthy man. . . .<sup>70</sup>

Not everyone from Kansas held John Brown in high regard. Some questioned his sanity and many thought it a relief to have him no longer stirring up trouble on the border with slaveholding Missouri, but few if any would have been found in the state to repudiate the man's sincere religious motivation.

Brown was without doubt idiosyncratic. In fact, his behavior departed at crucial points from conventional Christian morality, though he found ways to justify the worst of his trespasses (e.g., lying and murder). Historian David Potter reflected that "he did not live up to his rigid standards, and his life was checkered with episodes that must have been very hard on the self-respect of a man of such exacting righteousness."<sup>71</sup> His idiosyncrasy also found expression in ways that modern Americans would find appealing. Brown was unerringly egalitarian in a day when racism was the norm among most northern and southern whites of virtually every religious perspective. Outside noteworthy pockets of social egalitarianism, such as Oberlin, evangelical

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<sup>70</sup> Sarah Everett to "Dear Jennie," 31 December 1859 and 18 January 1860, Letters of John and Sarah Everett, 1854-1864, Kansas State Historical Society.

<sup>71</sup> Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 356.

Christians tended to be as prejudiced toward blacks as liberal Christians and radical religionists. In North Elba, New York, however, where Brown's family lived before his death, whites and blacks intermingled freely in the community. African Americans were frequent guests at the Brown home and he treated individuals with equal respect regardless of their skin color. Brown's convictions with regard to racial equality made it difficult for him to establish a church home during his adult life. In his *Religious Life of John Brown*, Louis A. DeCaro asserts that this historical peculiarity had social-religious consequences for Brown. "On the one hand," DeCaro argues, "his radical anti-slavery views were unacceptable to conservative Calvinists, while on the other his evangelical convictions made him religiously incompatible with liberal Protestants and other unorthodox abolitionists."<sup>72</sup> For much of his adult life, Brown did not feel at home in any church.

Observers of John Brown in the years just prior to the attack on Harpers Ferry were struck by a religious demeanor that hearkened back to an earlier age, yet was compatible with nineteenth-century Calvinist theology. Educated Americans who spent any time with Brown after 1855 and wrote their impressions of the man used startlingly similar language to describe him. Lydia Maria Child, a popular author in nineteenth-century America, shared Brown's abolitionist fervor, but not his orthodoxy or his militancy (she was a Unitarian and a pacifist). She was nonetheless impressed with the old-fashioned spiritual authenticity she sensed in Brown. After meeting with him, Child proclaimed her impression to a friend, Sarah Shaw, "He is a real psalm-singing, praying Puritan, of the old stamp."<sup>73</sup> Civil War gender historian ,Wendy

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<sup>72</sup> DeCaro, *Religious Life of John Brown*, 89.

<sup>73</sup> Lydia Maria Child to Sarah Shaw, 4 November 1859, quoted by Wendy Hamand Venet, "'Cry Aloud and Spare Not': Northern Antislavery Women and John Brown's Raid," in Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 106. See also, Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 360.

Hamand Venet, cites the reminiscence of another well-known nineteenth-century woman who met Brown. Writing decades later, Julia Ward Howe described the sober, patriarchal figure as “a Puritan of the Puritans, forceful, concentrated, and self-contained.”<sup>74</sup> F.B. Sanborn, the youngest member of the “Secret Six” and promoter of Brown among New England’s elite abolitionist circles in the 1850s, recalled later that “nothing could shake the purpose of the old Puritan.”<sup>75</sup> Evangelical abolitionist Wendell Phillips and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau both used a similar but more explicit historical reference to situate Brown for those who had never met him. Historian James Brewer Stewart summarized Phillips’ impression: to him, “Brown was a ‘regular Cromwellian, dug up from two centuries’ ago.”<sup>76</sup> Likewise, in his *Plea for Captain John Brown*, written in October 1859, Thoreau gushed that Brown “was one of that class of whom we hear a great deal, but, for the most part, see nothing at all—the Puritans. It would be in vain to kill him. He died lately in the time of Cromwell, but he reappeared here.”<sup>77</sup> Before Harpers Ferry, John Brown played directly to these perceptions. He even went so far as to dramatically increase the size of his beard between 1857 and 1859 to fit the persona of a biblical prophet, an image he desired and his benefactors admired.<sup>78</sup> His religion was in this sense idiosyncratic, but not unorthodox. In short, John Brown was an evangelical Congregationalist, Calvinist in his theology and egalitarian in his practice of Christian fellowship with a militant and stern

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<sup>74</sup> Venet, “Northern Antislavery Women,” in Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 98.

<sup>75</sup> Sanborn, *Recollections*, 146.

<sup>76</sup> James Brewer Stewart, *Wendell Phillips, Liberty’s Hero* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 206; Reynolds, *John Brown: Abolitionist*, 19.

<sup>77</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” in James Redpath, ed., *Echoes of Harper’s Ferry* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 19.

<sup>78</sup> Sanborn, *Recollections*, 76-77, 142-143. Compare two photos taken of Brown in Boston, one in 1857 and the other in 1859 shortly before the raid. Brown’s appearance could not have changed so drastically by accident.

disposition reminiscent of an earlier generation of Puritans. His faith was orthodox, evangelical, idiosyncratic with regard to contemporary practice, but unfeigned in terms of religious devotion.

Brown's religion was the source and sustainer of his militant abolitionism. His views on slavery were formed in the framework of his evangelical faith. By this is meant, first, that Brown applied the Bible's teaching directly as he saw it to the injustice of slavery. In doing so he was acting quite consistently with evangelical biblical interpretation. J. C. Furnas, though anything but a sympathetic chronicler, made explicit the crucial ties between the evangelical movement in the Church of England and the British antislavery cause.<sup>79</sup> He rightly compared John Brown's reckless approach at Harpers Ferry to the sense of urgency and confidence in Providence that drove many British antislavery evangelicals to "plunge in regardless and leave the details to God." According to Furnas, "That . . . please recall, is exactly what Old Brown did."<sup>80</sup> But, secondly, Brown coupled that practical application of biblical teaching with a willingness to abrogate Scriptural admonitions on non-violence and submission to civil authority. Brown made clear in interviews and his written "Testimonies" from jail that he believed he had acted on divine authority, a "higher law" that permitted—indeed required—Christians to violently oppose the laws of civil rulers at times. A *New York Herald* reporter was among correspondents from numerous northern newspapers to be given access to Brown almost from the hour of his capture until that of his execution. He recorded an informative exchange between an inquirer and Brown just three days after the crisis at Harpers Ferry was resolved:

A BYSTANDER – Do you consider this a religious movement?

MR. BROWN – It is, in my opinion, the greatest service a man can render to God.

BYSTANDER – Do you consider yourself an instrument in the hands of Providence?

MR. BROWN – I do.

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<sup>79</sup> J. C. Furnas, *The Road to Harpers Ferry* (New York: W. Sloane Associates, 1959), 251.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

BYSTANDER – Upon what principle do you justify your acts?

MR. BROWN – Upon the golden rule. I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them; that is why I am here. . . . It is my sympathy with the oppressed and the wronged, that are as good as you and as precious in the sight of God.<sup>81</sup>

This exchange helps explain why Brown could display no remorse during his trial and why he borrowed words from the apostles in Acts 4:19 and 5:29 when he justified his actions from prison in Virginia. “I have no regret for the transaction for which I am condemned,” he wrote, and admitted, “I went against the laws of men, it is true; but ‘whether it be right to obey God or men, judge ye.’”<sup>82</sup> This combination of religious belief and conviction served Brown’s purposes as a militant abolitionist well. Brown biographer Stephen B. Oates argues persuasively that Brown’s particular mix of mystical self-assurance—that God had personally selected him to initiate the destruction of slavery and judgment on slaveholders—and Brown’s “absorption with the Old Testament and his intense Calvinist faith” created the man’s zeal to carry through whatever the cost.<sup>83</sup>

At one point, Henry David Thoreau called Brown “a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles,” but his accolade was not intended as a theological description.<sup>84</sup> Instead,

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<sup>81</sup> “The Harper’s Ferry Outbreak,” *New York Herald* 24 (New York, NY), 21 October 1859: 1, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/news/paperRetrieve.do?scale=0.33&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&prodId=NCNP&tabID=T003&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&currentPosition=9&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591021%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22New+York+Herald+%28New+York%2C+NY%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&fromPage=&inPS=true&userGroupName=ksu&pageNumber=&docId=GT3003656667&currentPosition=9&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3003656667&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&dp=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&pageAtlanticName=&scale=0.33&orientation=0&lastPageIndex=1&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&pageIndex=1&publicationTitle=&previousPage=page&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=1867&imageWidth=1832](http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/news/paperRetrieve.do?scale=0.33&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&prodId=NCNP&tabID=T003&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&currentPosition=9&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591021%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22New+York+Herald+%28New+York%2C+NY%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&fromPage=&inPS=true&userGroupName=ksu&pageNumber=&docId=GT3003656667&currentPosition=9&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3003656667&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&dp=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&pageAtlanticName=&scale=0.33&orientation=0&lastPageIndex=1&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&pageIndex=1&publicationTitle=&previousPage=page&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=1867&imageWidth=1832) (accessed January 15, 2017).

<sup>82</sup> John Brown, *Testimonies of Capt. John Brown at Harper’s Ferry, with his Address to the Court*, Variant title, *Extracts from the letters of Capt. John Brown* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1860), 10.

<sup>83</sup> Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 233, 237; Brown to Higginson, 14 May 1858.

<sup>84</sup> Thoreau, “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” in Redpath, ed., *Echoes of Harper’s Ferry*, 21.

Thoreau praised Brown's idealism in action. Although they shared almost nothing in common with regard to religious belief, Brown epitomized what Thoreau had, as of yet, failed to become, a man who pursued ideals aggressively without thought for the consequences or likelihood of success. The same simple zeal had charmed the older transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, during a meeting between him and Brown in 1857. "For," according to Oates, "in a conversation they had in Emerson's home Brown made a telling remark: he said that he believed in two things—the Bible and the Declaration of Independence—and that it was 'better that a whole generation of men, women and children should pass away by a violent death than that a word of either should be violated in this country.'"<sup>85</sup> Brown's passion was born of a religious confidence in the rightness of his cause that had led to violence before and would again. Whether his passion would produce a successful plan to incite slave revolt at Harpers Ferry was another question.

Brown revealed his plan for a raid on Harpers Ferry as early as August of 1857 in heated discussions with Hugh Forbes, an "English Adventurer," but the idea had probably been conceived several years before.<sup>86</sup> Forbes had military experience in Europe, having written a manual on military tactics that enamored Brown. Brown employed him for a time to assist in planning and training for assaults on "slave power." Forbes had his own plan for employing violence to free slaves, however, and strongly countered multiple points in Brown's proposal for Harpers Ferry that Forbes considered utterly deficient. Brown would not be dissuaded. He had little patience for anyone who contradicted him and far too much conviction that the action he planned was ordained of God to waste time debating its merits or its righteousness.

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<sup>85</sup> Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 197. Brown made a similar pronouncement to Sanborn about the same time.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 201, 211-212; Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 362-363.



Taking into consideration Brown's religious beliefs, dynamic convictions and moral self-justification helps to contextualize the shifting assessments of those Brown considered his most important human adjudicators: fellow evangelicals. Evangelical opinions mattered to Brown not because his faith or personality required human approbation, but because these Christians made up a high percentage of gradualist antislavery advocates in America.<sup>87</sup> His public dialogue during the trial and while awaiting execution was formulated to target the most likely group of potential abolitionists in the nation. His evangelical vocabulary and appeal to higher law would have a powerful bearing on his mythological significance to the abolitionist cause after the raid—a subject addressed frequently in the historical literature of recent decades.

### **Northern Evangelical Assessments of the Harpers Ferry Raid**

The ambivalence with which northern evangelical Christians initially greeted the news of the Harpers Ferry debacle was partly due to their uncertainty about the religious certification of its principle figure. In the immediate aftermath of Harpers Ferry, antislavery advocates in general sought to distance themselves from Brown and radicals of his ilk. There was general shock that even a proponent of immediate abolition had resorted to attempting to ignite armed slave insurrection. Few scenarios struck dread into the hearts of Americans—northern or southern—like the imagined carnage of retaliation that slaves, given the chance, might perpetrate on their former tormentors. On the day after Brown was captured, the *Albany Evening Journal*, a Republican but non-abolitionist newspaper, reported:

At last we have more definite information as to the origin of the outbreak at Harper's Ferry. It seems that some fifteen or twenty misguided and desperate men engaged in a plot to bring about a revolt of the Slaves. Nor did they stop at the crime of seeking to plunge a peaceful community into the horrors of a servile insurrection. . . . None but a madman could seriously expect that twenty men could make head against the whole

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<sup>87</sup> DeCaro, *Religious Life of John Brown*, 280. DeCaro notes “the scarcity of evangelical abolitionist clergymen,” but his meaning seems closer to “the scarcity of evangelical *immediatist* abolitionists.”

Union, and none but those whose sense of justice was blunted by deep passion could fail to see that they were committing a crime against Innocent men, women and children, which would inevitably meet, and justly deserve, universal condemnation.<sup>88</sup>

The *New York Herald*, a publication noted for its opposition to abolitionists, reported nonetheless accurately on October 21 that “The newspaper organs of the republican party, somewhat embarrassed and discordant in their treatment of the late abolition outbreak at Harper’s Ferry, agree at least upon one point, the plea of insanity in behalf of ‘Old Brown’ and his deluded confederates.”<sup>89</sup> The *Herald’s* assertion about pleas of insanity was on the mark. In language that offered both compassionate excuse for the seemingly hopeless endeavor and not a little hint of self-preservation, most northern evangelicals at first agreed with those who found madness to be the only explanation for Brown’s actions. The editorially pro-Republican Massachusetts paper, *Lowell Daily Citizen*, at first refused to accept reports that “Captain Brown of Kansas” could have been involved in an attack on Harpers Ferry, but changed tack as telegraphed confirmations piled up. “The accounts last received seem to confirm the report that Brown of Kansas was the master-spirit of the movement,” the paper reluctantly admitted, but quickly added, “though it is

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<sup>88</sup> “The Trouble at Harper’s Ferry,” *Albany Evening Journal* (Albany, NY), 19 October 1859: n.p., Secession Era Editorials Project, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/njajjb59a19a.htm> (accessed January 15, 2017).

<sup>89</sup> “The Harper’s Ferry Abolition Outbreak and the Republican Party,” *New York Herald* 24 (New York, NY), 21 October 1859: 4, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591021%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22New+York+Herald+%28New+York%2C+NY%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchId=R3&docId=GT3003656667&currentPosition=9&currentPosition=9&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3003656667&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&dp=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&shipname=&scale=0.33&orientation=0&lastPageIndex=4&fromPage=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&pageIndex=4&mcode=&navigation=true&recNum=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=1832](http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591021%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22New+York+Herald+%28New+York%2C+NY%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R3&docId=GT3003656667&currentPosition=9&currentPosition=9&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3003656667&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&dp=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&shipname=&scale=0.33&orientation=0&lastPageIndex=4&fromPage=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&pageIndex=4&mcode=&navigation=true&recNum=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=1832) (accessed April 10, 2012).

difficult to conceive how any sane man could have ventured upon so fool-hardy an enterprise.”<sup>90</sup> Regardless of the imprecision of these lay diagnoses, evangelicals had understandable motives to ascribe insanity to the mastermind and captain of the ill-fated raid.<sup>91</sup>

For one thing, evangelical abolitionists, like their non-evangelical counterparts, feared the potentially negative impact of Harpers Ferry on the cause of immediate emancipation. Members of Brown’s supportive cohort known as the “Secret Six,” had reason to fear personal incriminations in connection with the raid. The charges against Brown included the murder of four whites and one slave (an unfortunate railroad baggage handler who became the first casualty at the hands of those committed to freeing the slaves), conspiracy to incite slave rebellion, and treason against the State of Virginia. The first two charges were only to be expected, but the last one bore all the marks of reactionary southern honor. The raid was taken as an insult to Virginians as much as it was a crime. Never having been a citizen of Virginia and, thus, owing it no allegiance, Brown’s actions can hardly have been counted treasonous on the state level. The charge probably also reflected prosecutorial confusion over Governor Henry A. Wise’s decision to try the defendants in state rather than federal court. The raid against a federal installation and the damning evidence of Brown’s “Provisional Constitution” certainly conveyed treasonous

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<sup>90</sup> “Troubles at Harper’s Ferry,” *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* 9 (Lowell, MA), 19 October 1859: 2, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591019%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C35%2922Lowell+Daily+Citizen+%28Lowell%2C+Ma%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchId=R4&docId=GT3001668191&currentPosition=18&currentPosition=18&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3001668191&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&dp=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&scale=0.33&pageIndex=2&orientation=&docPage=page&enlarge=&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&specialIssues=&shipname=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=1824&imageWidth=1863&imageWidth=1824](http://find.galegroup.com/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591019%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C35%2922Lowell+Daily+Citizen+%28Lowell%2C+Ma%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R4&docId=GT3001668191&currentPosition=18&currentPosition=18&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3001668191&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&dp=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&scale=0.33&pageIndex=2&orientation=&docPage=page&enlarge=&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&specialIssues=&shipname=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=1824&imageWidth=1863&imageWidth=1824) (accessed April 16, 2012).

<sup>91</sup> Wyatt-Brown, “A Volcano Beneath a Mountain of Snow” in Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 28. Historians continue to comment on Brown’s sanity. Without doubt, Brown suffered from bouts of depression.

intent with regard to the government of the United States.<sup>92</sup> Alleged treason was one of the most horrifying elements of the Harpers Ferry raid to northern abolitionists who feared the aspersion it would bring to the cause and notable individuals within it. It was undoubtedly a factor leading to initially widespread declarations of Brown's insanity by abolitionists in general and evangelicals in particular.<sup>93</sup>

Many evangelical Christians found the violence of Brown's raid especially repulsive. Attributing Brown's willingness to kill and incite a potentially murderous slave revolt in the South to mental imbalance helped isolate the man's motivation from his methods. Also on October 21, but in language more specific than that of the *New York Herald*, quoted above, the *Chicago Press & Tribune* averred, "There is not a public journal of any party, or public man of any shade of opinion found to approve [the raiders'] means or justify their end."<sup>94</sup> Initially, a majority of evangelicals were certainly among the "shade[s] of opinion" of those who roundly condemned Brown's violent means. Just days after news of the raid broke, "The Western Tract Convention of Evangelical Christians" met in Chicago. This Convention had broken away from the American Tract Society due to the latter's unwillingness to confront slavery as a moral issue in its publications.<sup>95</sup> In a brief summary on the results of their proceedings, several newspapers

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<sup>92</sup> Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 367-368. What exactly Brown understood about the role of his constitution remains unclear.

<sup>93</sup> Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 310-313.

<sup>94</sup> *Chicago Press & Tribune*, 21 October 1859, quoted in Reynolds, *John Brown: Abolitionist*, 339.

<sup>95</sup> "A Western Tract Convention," *Daily Cleveland Herald* 25 (Cleveland, OH), 13 October 1859: 1, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591013%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C40%29%22Cleveland+Daily+Herald+%28Cleveland%2C+Oh%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchId=R5&docId=GT3005071188&currentPosition=3&docId=&dp=Oct+13,1859&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT2705071186&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=UDVIN&docPage=page&fromPage=&recNum=&ne](http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591013%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C40%29%22Cleveland+Daily+Herald+%28Cleveland%2C+Oh%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R5&docId=GT3005071188&currentPosition=3&docId=&dp=Oct+13,1859&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT2705071186&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=UDVIN&docPage=page&fromPage=&recNum=&ne)

reported that “In view of the Harper’s Ferry affair, a resolution to the effect that the Convention desired the abolition of slavery by peaceable means alone was passed unanimously.”<sup>96</sup> The Western Tract Convention’s commitment to abolitionism remained unabated, however, because the same meeting concluded with approval of “a united agency for obtaining anti-slavery tracts, wherever published.”<sup>97</sup> In his 2005 biography of Brown, literary specialist David Reynolds notes correctly that “In the hundreds of Northern newspaper articles written during the week

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wOrientation=0&specialIssues=&newScale=0.33&previousPage=page&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm (accessed April 16, 2012).

<sup>96</sup> “This Afternoon’s Report, Western Tract Convention,” *Daily Cleveland Herald* 25 (Cleveland, OH), 20 October 1859: 3, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591020%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C40%29%22Cleveland+Daily+Herald+%28Cleveland%2C+Oh%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchId=R6&docId=GT3005071637&currentPosition=29&currentPosition=29&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3005071637&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&dp=Oct 20,1859&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&scale=0.33&pageIndex=3&orientation=0&docPage=page&enlarge=&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&specialIssues=&shipname=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imageWidth=2630](http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591020%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C40%29%22Cleveland+Daily+Herald+%28Cleveland%2C+Oh%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R6&docId=GT3005071637&currentPosition=29&currentPosition=29&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3005071637&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&dp=Oct 20,1859&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&scale=0.33&pageIndex=3&orientation=0&docPage=page&enlarge=&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&specialIssues=&shipname=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imageWidth=2630) (accessed January 15, 2017); “The Western Tract Convention of Evangelical Christians,” *New York Herald* 24 (New York, NY), 21 October 1859: 2, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?scale=0.33&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&prodId=NCNP&tabID=T003&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&currentPosition=9&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591021%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22New+York+Herald+%28New+York%2C+NY%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&fromPage=&inPS=true&userGroupName=ksu&pageNumber=&docId=GT3003656667&currentPosition=9&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3003656667&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&dp=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&pageAtlanticName=&scale=0.33&orientation=0&lastPageIndex=2&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&pageIndex=2&previousPage=page&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=1832&imageWidth=1867&imageWidth=1832](http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?scale=0.33&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&prodId=NCNP&tabID=T003&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&currentPosition=9&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591021%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22New+York+Herald+%28New+York%2C+NY%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&fromPage=&inPS=true&userGroupName=ksu&pageNumber=&docId=GT3003656667&currentPosition=9&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3003656667&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&dp=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&pageAtlanticName=&scale=0.33&orientation=0&lastPageIndex=2&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&pageIndex=2&previousPage=page&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=1832&imageWidth=1867&imageWidth=1832) (accessed April 16, 2012); “Western Tract Convention,” *Vermont Chronicle* 34 (Bellows Falls, VT), 1 November 1859: 174, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?scale=0.33&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&prodId=NCNP&tabID=T003&searchId=R7&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&currentPosition=24&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591101%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C39%29%22Vermont+Chronicle+%28Bellows+Falls%2C+Vt%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&fromPage=&inPS=true&userGroupName=ksu&pageNumber=&docId=GT3016253648&currentPosition=24&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3016253648&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&dp=Nov 1,1859&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&pageAtlanticName=&scale=0.33&pageIndex=2&orientation=0&docPage=page&enlarge=&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=1743&imageWidth=1730](http://find.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?scale=0.33&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&prodId=NCNP&tabID=T003&searchId=R7&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&currentPosition=24&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591101%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C39%29%22Vermont+Chronicle+%28Bellows+Falls%2C+Vt%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&fromPage=&inPS=true&userGroupName=ksu&pageNumber=&docId=GT3016253648&currentPosition=24&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT3016253648&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=NCNP&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&reformatPage=N&docPage=page&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&dp=Nov 1,1859&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&pageAtlanticName=&scale=0.33&pageIndex=2&orientation=0&docPage=page&enlarge=&recNum=&navigation=true&fromPage=&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm&imgWidth=1743&imageWidth=1730) (accessed April 16, 2012).

<sup>97</sup> “This Afternoon’s Report” *Daily Cleveland Herald* 25, 20 October 1859: 3.

immediately after the raid, not one wholeheartedly supported Brown. Few manifested any sympathy at all.”<sup>98</sup> Although fairly characterizing initial reactions across wide political and religious spectrums in the North, Reynolds’ summation does not address with precision the variety of reactions among evangelical abolitionists.

Printed sermons by prominent northern evangelical preachers, in newspapers or in pamphlet form, carried their assessments to a significant readership that extended well to the west. Sarah Everett of Osawatomie, Kansas, represents the geographic distance yet religious and political proximity to John Brown that many evangelical Christians experienced in 1859. She also illustrates the widespread availability of sermon literature across nineteenth-century American evangelical Christianity. In her letter to “Dear Jennie” in June of 1860, Everett mentioned the impact of such sermon literature:

Do you read H.[enry] W.[ard] B.[eecher]’s sermons in the *Independent*? I believe if it were not for reading now and then some things in his sermons that I should tire to death of this life and give it up—I don’t read them all—I perfectly abhor a printed sermon. . . . Verily [Beecher’s] are like the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps most startling of all in the debate that swirled in northern evangelical circles over the morality of the Harpers Ferry raid is the fact that few evangelicals expressed real discomfort with its obvious contradiction to the New Testament’s teaching on submission to civil authority. On the other hand, the closely related concept of higher law played a central role in sorting out northern evangelical assessments of the raid. Northern evangelical assessments of Brown and his raid on Harpers Ferry shifted in the weeks that followed. Many northern evangelicals found themselves in a serious quandary with regard to the raid. This was because, in Brown’s violent attempt to end slavery, suddenly incompatible evangelical goals collided: working alongside

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<sup>98</sup> Reynolds, *John Brown: Abolitionist*, 339. See also, Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 41-42.

<sup>99</sup> Sarah Everett to “Dear Jennie,” 5 June 1860.

civil authority to construct a Christian national identity, and terminating the national sin of slavery that civil authority seemed determined to protect. In a wide variety of churches and denominations, simple church-goers and ministers alike wrestled with the ramifications of Brown's raid. And, in keeping with evangelical tradition, most sought comfort and clarity in the teachings of the Bible.

Predictably, John Brown quoted from the premier New Testament text that implies a higher law to which Christians must conform when confronted by contradictory requirements of legitimate civil authorities: chapters four and five of the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>100</sup> Evangelical observers of Brown also found in this principle, alternately, either a reason for justifying Brown's actions or, less often, a reason for condemning them on some level. In this way, higher law theory engulfed the notion of obedience to civil authority. The swiftness with which higher law overshadowed biblical texts exhorting Christians to submit to civil authority demonstrated that the theory had already taken firm root in the minds of those who confessed to revere both divine and civil law.

Evangelical abolitionist women seemed especially intent on divorcing Brown's violence from the abolitionist cause. Describing the conflicted responses of northern antislavery women to Brown's tactics, Venet argues that "White female abolitionists may have taken on a greater burden in defending Brown than their male counterparts." She explains that the reason for this "burden" was that "Many of them came from a Quaker [mostly evangelical] and pacifist background; they found his violence deeply troubling."<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, some were able to move quickly beyond their concerns about the method and endorse the man's idealism. More quickly,

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<sup>100</sup> Brown, *Testimonies*, 10.

<sup>101</sup> Venet, "Northern Antislavery Women," in Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 100.

and perhaps more consistently, northern blacks grasped the significance of Brown's actions on behalf of race relations in America and endorsed his virtue. Voicing the astonishment and religious assessment of many free blacks upon hearing the account of Brown's raid, Harriet Tubman declared, "When I think how he gave up his life for our people, and how he never flinched, but was so brave to the end, it's clear to me it wasn't mortal man, it was God in him."<sup>102</sup> According to Morgan State University Professor Benjamin Quarles, though Brown's actions were "strongly condemned" at first in the North, "such denunciation was by no means universal," for "Blacks took Brown on his own terms—to them he was his own morality. Consistently they divorced his actions from his motives, preferring to dwell upon the latter."<sup>103</sup> Indeed, before long, many white abolitionists agreed with their overwhelmingly evangelical African-American counterparts.

In the weeks and months after Brown's capture, many evangelical Christians overcame their initial revulsion and began to assess the Harpers Ferry raid and its mastermind more favorably. Questions about Brown's sanity diminished, though debate on this point continues right down to the present.<sup>104</sup> Many biographers and historians have noted the meteoric rise of John Brown from pariah to martyr to saint in the months following his execution. Reynolds

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<sup>102</sup> Ednah Dow Cheney, *Reminiscences of Ednah Dow Cheney (Born Littlehale)* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1902), 81-82, Nineteenth Century Collections Online, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/tinyurl/4CbjQ8> (accessed January 11, 2017). See also, Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 161.

<sup>103</sup> Quarles, *Blacks on John Brown*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>104</sup> Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 372. In this writer's opinion, Brown was emphatically not insane. Potter's careful description explaining Brown's mental and emotional state is one of the best: "The evidence shows that Brown was very intense and aloof, that he became exclusively preoccupied with his one grand design, that he sometimes behaved in a very confused way, that he alternated between brief periods of decisive action and long intervals when it is hard to tell what he was doing, that mental instability occurred with significant frequency in his family, and that some believed he had a vindictive or even a homicidal streak with fantasies of superhuman greatness." But, even if all of these things faithfully attested to Brown's condition, they would not, as Potter implies, confirm genuine insanity.



advanced a singular explanation for the transformation of Brown's image. He argues that "the tide of negative commentary on Brown" that followed the assault would have won the day had it not been for transcendentalists. "In the North," Reynolds insists, "both the Harpers Ferry raid and Brown himself were at first sharply denounced. The Concord Transcendentalists led in resuscitating his image by defending both the man and his deed."<sup>105</sup> Reynolds is correct in so far as prominent Transcendentalists did move for a time to the forefront of Brown's advocacy. Reynolds emphasizes how "Thoreau noted the irony of Brown being demonized by antislavery Northerners but receiving high praise from his Southern captors, who loathed his cause but could not help but admire his character."<sup>106</sup> Less convincing is Reynolds' insistence that orthodox Christians in the North would be deeply swayed by verbal imagery reminiscent of their evangelical heritage but spoken by men whom they believed to be heretical. Could Emerson's memorable characterization of Brown, "that new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross," have served to move evangelical opinion about Brown, given its eloquent but unorthodox source?<sup>107</sup> Contemporary evangelical critiques of transcendental doctrine suggest otherwise.<sup>108</sup>

Before Reynolds' explanation is accepted as definitive, it should be noted that entrusting Transcendentalists with the role of principle opinion-changers on the character of John Brown

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<sup>105</sup> Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 335 cf. 343, 363.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>107</sup> Oscar W. Firkins, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 139, Google Books, [https://books.google.com/books?id=\\_JcHAQAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=_JcHAQAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false) (accessed January 13, 2017).

<sup>108</sup> "Largely on the basis of the reputation he achieved by publishing *Nature*, [Ralph Waldo] Emerson was invited to deliver the Phi Beta Kappa lectures at Harvard in 1837. . . . Local ministers were outraged, and Emerson was not invited back to Harvard for nearly 30 years. . . . Princeton's Charles Hodge, one of the leading orthodox theologians of the nineteenth century, wrote, 'If it was not for its profaneness, what could be more ludicrous than Mr. Emerson's Address?'" Hankins, *Second Great Awakening*, 29-30.

assumes that evangelicals, like other Christians, would have remained unaffected in their opinions by Brown's self-justification through his "Testimonies." Brown's courtroom speeches, letters and public declarations were widely published and distributed across the nation during his trial.<sup>109</sup> They were read with great appetite among northern evangelicals who found in Brown's articulate self-defense the language and principles of faith they shared. In a passage not unlike many of Brown's letters to his family from the jail in Virginia, he wrote:

I am quite cheerful, having, as I trust, the peace of God, which 'passeth all understanding,' to 'rule in my heart,' and the testimony (in some degree) of a good conscience that I have not lived altogether in vain. I can trust God with both the time and the manner of my death, believing, as I now do, that for me at this time to seal my testimony for God and humanity with my blood, will do vastly more towards advancing the cause I have earnestly endeavored to promote, than all I have done in my life before.<sup>110</sup>

Mixed with universal affirmations of Brown's unflinching courage and calm, evangelical Christians could only have concluded that his performance evidenced the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in his life. Venet relates that "Scores of . . . Northern women wrote to Brown. . . . Many of the letters were deeply religious in tone, replete with recommendations of biblical passages for Brown to read and prayers for his eternal life."<sup>111</sup> It is no wonder, for some of the most evangelically phrased and personally emotive passages in letters from jail to his children would have undoubtedly touched the hearts of many mothers. Not long before his execution, he wrote: "My dear young children, will you listen to this last poor admonition of one who can only love you? O, be determined at once to give your whole heart to God, and let nothing shake or

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<sup>109</sup> Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 43; Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 308. Oates suggests with insight that "Had the magistrates been more perceptive they might have realized that their wounded prisoner, with his 'piercing eyes' and 'resolute countenance,' was determined to use the Charlestown court as a forum to rally Northern sentiment to his cause." Ibid., 310-311.

<sup>110</sup> Brown, *Testimonies*, 5.

<sup>111</sup> Venet, "Northern Antislavery Women," in Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 105.

alter that resolution.”<sup>112</sup> Evangelicals would have read such words not as those of a deranged and dangerous villain, but of a passionate follower of Jesus Christ to be emulated rather than despised. And, it should not be forgotten that the work of Transcendentalists, however meaningful, did not occur in a vacuum of public activism on Brown’s behalf. For example, Stewart notes that Wendell Phillips, “At once, after the fact . . . began to participate vicariously in the Harper’s Ferry raid, offering lyrical praise and acts of devotion to his new hero-saint, John Brown.”<sup>113</sup> Methodist bishop and abolitionist, Gilbert Haven (1821-1880), was among those who offered compelling justification of Brown’s actions by perceptively arguing that the real responsibility for violence at Harpers Ferry lay with slaveholders and the oppressive system of labor they perpetuated.<sup>114</sup>

Notwithstanding the efforts of well-wishers to plead his righteous cause, John Brown was hanged in Charlestown, Virginia, on December 2, 1859, just forty-five days after the conclusion of the attack on Harpers Ferry. In the space of that time, public opinion in the North, and especially among evangelical abolitionist, had already shifted considerably. Newspapers highlighted public expressions of sympathy across the North for Brown and his family in early December. By December 1, the *Albany Evening Journal* reported that “Already, the muttered thunder of a pent-up sympathy is heard. The pulpit, the platform and the press, have already spoken with most intense emphasis. . . .”<sup>115</sup> The *New York Times* confirmed the *Journal*’s

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<sup>112</sup> Brown, *Testimonies*, 13.

<sup>113</sup> Stewart, *Wendell Phillips*, 202-203. Regarding Phillips’ evangelical faith, see Ibid., 16, 36.

<sup>114</sup> William B. Gravely, *Gilbert Haven, Methodist Abolitionist: A Study in Race, Religion, and Reform, 1850-1880* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), 76.

<sup>115</sup> “The Execution of John Brown,” *Albany Evening Journal* (Albany, NY), 1 December 1859: n.p., Secession Era Editorials Project, <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/nyajjb59c01a.htm> (accessed December 16, 2016).

impression when on December 3 it ran lengthy reports not only of the execution but of meetings held around the city in sympathy and then memorial to Brown. The *Times* described in great detail the scene at a prayer meeting assembled in abolitionist Rev. George B. Cheever's (Presbyterian) Church of the Puritans, including specifics of who attended, Scriptures that were read, and transcriptions of prayers and public comments by the congregation:

The small lecture room of Dr. Cheever's Church was filled yesterday morning, it being announced that a prayer meeting for John Brown would be held. . . . Mr. Tappan made a prayer, speaking of Brown as a Christian martyr in the hands of an infuriated mob, and praying that posterity would rise up and call him blessed. . . ."<sup>116</sup>

Potter declares, "When John Brown was hanged . . . the organized expressions of sympathy in the North reached startling proportions. Church bells tolled, black bunting was hung out, minute guns were fired, prayer meetings assembled, and memorial resolutions were adopted. . . . The death of a national hero could not have called forth a greater outpouring of grief."<sup>117</sup>

Notwithstanding reservations about Brown's methods, many evangelical Christians would have been among those who expressed the kind of sympathy contemporary newspaper accounts and Potter describes.

Contributing to the argument that slavery itself was responsible for the violence it provoked, Pastor John P. Gulliver of the Broadway Congregational Church of Norwich, Connecticut, developed a careful exposition of the symbols of a lioness and her cubs ("whelps") in Ezekiel 19:1-9 to make the application that the violence required to maintain the institution of slavery inevitably begat more violence. Gulliver's argument, like Haven's, placed blame for the

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<sup>116</sup> "Public Expressions of Sympathy: Prayer Meeting in New York," *New York Times* (New York, NY), 3 December 1859: 1, ProQuest, New York Times (1857-1922), Kansas State University Libraries, <http://search.proquest.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/91478561/A12D947E45674DC4PQ/35?accountid=11789> (accessed January 15, 2017).

<sup>117</sup> Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 378.

Harpers Ferry raid on southern slaveholders instead of on the perpetrator of the act, John Brown. Accurately identifying the biblical symbols he employed as representative of Israel at a certain point in history, the preacher drove home the point that “as usual, this violent and ferocious spirit awakened fear among surrounding nations; fear led to self-defence, and self-defence led to violence and cruelty—the whole being directly traceable to the original ferocity of the lioness and her companions.”<sup>118</sup> Likewise, according to Gulliver, America had become the lioness. “It cherishes an institution, and is governed by an institution,” he declared, “which is, in its essential nature, violent and barbarous.”<sup>119</sup> It was not difficult to raise examples of slavery’s tendency to violence. The corporeal punishment of slaves, bloodshed over the fight to extend slavery to Kansas Territory, and the recent raid on Harpers Ferry were among the testimonies he believed were plain for all to see.<sup>120</sup>

Northern evangelical reflections on Brown and the raid on Harpers Ferry tended to lower the threshold of their tolerance of the violence that slavery produced as an institution, and to heighten their threshold of tolerance for violent civil disobedience to combat it. From Osawatomie, Kansas, almost two weeks after Brown was hanged, a free-state homesteader named John Everett wrote of an attempt to capture a *free* black from Missouri who was accused of being an escaped slave and place him in bondage. Recounting how in this case “the hounds changed places with the hare,” Everett celebrated the way in which the slave catchers were

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<sup>118</sup> John P. Gulliver, *The Lioness and Her Whelps, A Sermon on Slavery, Preached in the Broadway Congregational Church, Norwich, Conn., December 18, 1859* (Norwich: Manning, Perry & Co., 1860), 10.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>120</sup> As an example of abolitionist use of public fear over slavery’s tendency to incite violence, see Joshua Coffin, *An Account of Some of the Principal Slave Insurrections, and Others, which have Occurred, or Been Attempted, in the United States and Elsewhere, During the Last Two Centuries, with Various Remarks* (New York: The American Anti-Slavery Society, 1860).

relieved of their possessions by locals and sent back empty-handed. He concluded by relating his story as an example of higher law theory in action:

Kidnapping or reclaiming fugitives has never been profitable in these parts, and if justice is not administered with due respect to the forms of law, remember that federal law is law here [he alluded to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850], the law that pursues such as John Brown—mistaken and erring but noble in his objects with most deadly and unrelenting hatred; but never has punished a kidnapper never has punished one of those traitors who tried to steal the liberties of the whole people of Kansas.<sup>121</sup>

Appeals to a higher law came with increasing frequency from abolitionist pulpits across the North after Brown's death, and served to justify increasingly aggressive abolitionist opposition to slavery. Beginning on the first Sunday after Brown's execution, Pastor Nathaniel Hall of the First (Congregational) Church in Dorchester, Massachusetts, preached three weeks in a row on the subject of the Harpers Ferry raid. In the first of these sermons (repeated two Sundays in a row), Hall contended that he believed in peace and love as an antidote to the slave controversy, but nonetheless was compelled to defend Brown's character and motivation. According to Hall, "It is the *motive* stamps the deed; it is the *purpose* makes the man, morally regarded."<sup>122</sup> Thus, Hall concluded, "Here is a man distinguished for his moral nobility . . . and Virginia hangs him. 'He broke her laws.' Yes, but only because the law of Eternal Justice was broken in their enactment. . . ."<sup>123</sup> Hall did not come as close as some abolitionist preachers to justifying the actual violence of Brown in Virginia, but he did find extenuating circumstances in a Christian's right to serve a higher law, circumstances that helped to mitigate Old Brown's guilt.

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<sup>121</sup> John Everett to "Dear Father," 14, December 1859, Letters of John and Sarah Everett, 1854-1864, Kansas Historical Society.

<sup>122</sup> Nathaniel Hall, "The Man, The Deed, The Event: A Sermon Preached in The First Church, Dorchester [MA] on Sunday, Dec. 4, and repeated Dec. 11, 1859" in *Two Sermons on Slavery and Its Hero-Victim* (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1859), 26, HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t6833wx6v;view=1up;seq=28> (accessed January 16, 2017).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 32.

Hall was not alone in his sermons' subject matter. A frustrated opponent of abolitionism wrote to the *New York Herald* in November 1859 to protest the petitions circulating in this and other papers for aid to John Brown's poor family in New York. Bemoaning their seditious implications, he complained that "There is a revolutionary sentiment at the bottom of this. . . . The design is to honor and glorify Brown, and to popularize his treason. It is intended also to show other 'devoted men' who are willing to follow his example, that they may feel assured that their families will be taken care of if they should 'pay the glorious forfeit of their lives' in doing the work of Heaven, and carrying out its 'higher law.'"<sup>124</sup> In his thorough survey of sermons between 1830 and 1865, historian David Chesebrough recognized that the theory of a higher law did not appear in northern pulpits suddenly in the late 1850s. Rather, in the 1830s and 1840s, "Northern preachers by the hundreds began to appropriate this appeal to higher law."<sup>125</sup> Thus, the higher law theory that stressed freedom for all men on the basis of their innate moral humanity was already firmly established in the thinking of many northern evangelicals before Brown struck his blow against the "grave sin" of denying men their freedom.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> "The New Era of the Anti-Slavery Agitation," *New York Herald* (New York, NY), 25 November 1859: 4, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, [http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591125%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22New+York+Herald+%28New+York%2C+NY%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE\\_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchId=R8&docId=GT3003654493&currentPosition=38&docId=&dp=Nov25,1859&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT2703654482&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=UDVIN&docPage=page&fromPage=&recNum=&newOrientation=0&specialIssues=&newScale=0.33&previousPage=page&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm](http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/newspaperRetrieve.do?qrySerId=Locale%28en%2C%29%3ALQE%3D%28da%2CNone%2C8%2918591125%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28jn%2CNone%2C32%29%22New+York+Herald+%28New+York%2C+NY%29%22%24&retrieveFormat=MULTIPAGE_DOCUMENT&sort=DateAscend&docLevel=FASCIMILE&inPS=true&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchId=R8&docId=GT3003654493&currentPosition=38&docId=&dp=Nov25,1859&docLevel=FASCIMILE&workId=&relevancePageBatch=GT2703654482&contentSet=LTO&callistoContentSet=UDVIN&docPage=page&fromPage=&recNum=&newOrientation=0&specialIssues=&newScale=0.33&previousPage=page&searchTypeName=PublicationSearchForm) (accessed April 20, 2012).

<sup>125</sup> Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 19.

<sup>126</sup> See also, Hall, "The Iniquity: A Sermon Preached in the First Church, Dorchester, on Sunday, Dec. 11, 1859," in Hall, *Two Sermons on Slavery and Its Hero-Victim*; Henry Ward Beecher, "Against a Compromise of Principle, Thanksgiving Day, November 29, 1860," in Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 65-82. These are just a few samples of evangelical sermons appealing to higher law in the case of John Brown.

There were evangelical voices that spoke out against the application of higher law theory as it was being widely espoused in abolitionist circles. One carefully argued, gradualist antislavery approach by Old School Presbyterian minister, Nathan Lewis Rice, adopted the idea of higher law, but re-packaged in a way that undercut those who defended radical abolitionist agitation based on higher law theory. His lectures implied a distinction between “divine law” and “higher law” as over against “civil law.” For Rice, divine law equaled the Bible, whereas the higher law of radical abolitionists only applied *parts* of Scriptural teaching to arrive at an ethical standard that contradicted other parts of the “inspired” text. He contended that “Slavery is a human, not a Divine institution, controlled by human law, yet recognized, though not *sanctioned*, by the Scriptures, and regulated also by Divine Law [i.e., the Scriptures].”<sup>127</sup> Thus, the minister was able to admonish Christian slave owners to order their lives and relations with their slaves in accordance with a higher, divine law: the written “Word of God.” And, Rice was also able to challenge radical abolitionists to adhere to the *true* higher law while agitating for an eventual end to the corrupt system of slave labor. “It is an astounding fact,” Rice exclaimed, “that ministers of Christ are found, in our country, not only justifying, but applauding the morality of the Harper’s Ferry invasion.”<sup>128</sup> Those who challenged the higher law theory as espoused by abolitionists

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<sup>127</sup> N. L. Rice, *Lectures on Slavery; Delivered in the North Presbyterian Church, Chicago* (Chicago: Church, Goodman & Cushing, 1860), 10, Sabine Americana, Gale, Kansas University Libraries, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY101671043&srchtp=a&ste=14> (accessed January 16, 2017).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 53. See also, Henry J. Van Dyke, *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism! A Sermon Preached in the First Presbyterian Church, of Brooklyn [NY], on Sunday Evening, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1860* (Baltimore: Henry Taylor, 1860); F. Maginnis, *Obedience to Magistrates, A Sermon for the Times; Discussing the Higher-Law Theory, as Developed in the Recent Tragic Scenes of Harper’s Ferry, Preached in the First Presbyterian Church of Euclid, East Cleveland, O., Dec. 10, A.D. 1859* (Cleveland: Fairbanks, Benedict & Co., 1860).



were being heard, for ministers of the caliber of William Lloyd Garrison felt compelled to reply, charging gradualists with “infidelity” in the cause of ending slavery.<sup>129</sup>

Even after months of reflection, northern assessments of John Brown were hardly uniform, let alone uniformly positive. During the riots he stirred in Boston during the 1860 Presidential election campaign, Wendell Phillips—a vocal defender of Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry—showed no inclination to turn away from a fight over the issue of immediate abolition. And, indeed, fights were still part of the slavery debate even in this abolitionist stronghold. He collected a bodyguard and armed himself with a pistol, keeping nearby him at home—presumably for inspiration as well as protection—the pike that Owen Brown had used at Harpers Ferry. “Armed with his revolver and clutching his pike,” Stewart concludes, “he regarded himself as a defiant example of law and order in a city exploited by mobs and conspiring cotton brokers.”<sup>130</sup> Stewart’s interpretation of Phillips’s persona is ironic considering that Phillips colluded with a figure such as John Brown, whose notoriety was drawn from fierce adherence to a code of ethics based on subjugating “law and order” to a higher law in “conspiring” to destroy slavery in the United States. Yet, on another level, Phillips’s attitude—if Stewart is correct—was quite similar to Brown’s Calvinist determination in the face of what he perceived to be an evil institution. He told fellow abolitionist, Mary Grew, that having a bodyguard was “worth being mobbed for. . . . There is some good in the world, despite original sin,” he quipped.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, “The ‘Infidelity’ of Abolitionism,” *The Liberator* 25 (Boston, MA), 21 December 1855: 202, ProQuest, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://search.proquest.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/docview/91149700/pageviewPDF/7A84D6624CF54A4EPQ/1?accountid=11789> (accessed January 16, 2017). The criticism was persistent, as witnessed by at least three publications of Garrison’s defense under this title between 1855 and 1860.

<sup>130</sup> Stewart, *Wendell Phillips*, 215.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

## Conclusion

In the Elizabethan English of the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible that almost all Protestants of the day revered and used, the first two verses in Romans chapter thirteen begin unequivocally: “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.” Nineteenth-century American evangelical Christians could not have helped but be familiar with the text of this chapter. Indeed, Sarah Everett, an evangelical Christian layperson, alluded to verse four of the passage in a letter on December 31, 1859, about Brown. “How in the name of common sense,” she asked, “do Christians propose to do away with this enormous sin if not with John Brown’s method . . . and how is the great southern heart to be reached but by God’s *ministers of vengeance*?”<sup>132</sup> Paradoxically, she applied the text to Brown’s actions in revolt against federal authority instead of to the government’s actions in judging him. On the contrary, in his *Lectures on Slavery*, Presbyterian minister and seminary professor N. L. Rice of Chicago referred obliquely to the text, warning that “The people of God may not become impatient . . . and attempt to take the providence of God out of His hands by *seizing the sword*, and removing wrongs or evils by violence.”<sup>133</sup> Here, again, Romans 13:4 was the reference point: “For [the ruler] is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.” It is remarkable that evangelicals of opposite opinion with regard to Brown’s violent methods each found explanation for his or her position in the same words.

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<sup>132</sup> Sarah Everett to “Dear Jennie,” 31 December 1859 and 18 January 1860. Emphasis mine.

<sup>133</sup> Rice, *Lectures on Slavery*, 52.

One of the few direct appeals to the concept of submission to civil authority in Romans 13 for interpreting Brown and his raid came from Pastor Leonard Bacon of the First Congregational Church in New Haven, Connecticut. Arguing that the government of the United States was failing to accomplish God's purposes for civil authority, Bacon reminded his congregation on Thanksgiving Day, 1859, "that magistrates are therefore God's servants for good to all alike, being divinely invested with power for the punishment of evil doers and for the praise and protection of them that do well; and that all who come within the jurisdiction of the government [i.e., blacks as well as whites] have an equal right to its impartial protection."<sup>134</sup> Bacon seems to have taken a middle ground, if such it can be called, between the militancy of Everett and the gradualist antislavery approach of Rice. Like many evangelical abolitionists in the late-1850s, however, he expressed doubt as to whether the federal government was fulfilling its side of the bargain. By failing to provide "impartial protection," he implied, the government risked forfeiting its right to expect the submission of citizens. In these three examples, one finds the variety of applications that could be developed when evangelicals invoked the text of Romans 13:1-7 to assess Brown's raid.

Considering the emphasis evangelicals placed on the Bible to define right Christian conduct, texts such as Romans 13:1-7—central to New Testament teaching on civil authority—stand out as remarkable for their limited ability to provoke evangelical criticism of the Harpers Ferry raid. Despite the apparent conflict between Brown's actions and the Bible's teaching on submission to civil authority, few northern evangelicals forcefully criticized the fiery abolitionist on this ground. Instead, they weighed his motive of ending slavery and moving closer to their

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<sup>134</sup> Leonard Bacon, *Established in Righteousness, A Discourse to the First Church and Society in New Haven, On a Day of Public Thanksgiving, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1859* (New Haven: Peck, White and Peck, 1859), 8, "Lost Cause Press" (Microfiche #3975), under Anti-Slavery Propaganda in the Oberlin College Library, Gale Collection, Wichita State University Libraries.

goal of a truly Christian nation against the morally questionable violence Brown employed to do so. The reason, I argue, was that a higher law theory had already taken firm root in the minds of those who confessed to revere both divine (biblical) and civil law. In the 1850s, this higher law theory engulfed the notion of obedience to civil authority, causing diminished attention to biblical admonitions to civil submission and allowing evangelical abolitionists to feel fully justified in resisting federal slave law. Thus, while the centrality of the Bible in evangelical faith did inform how evangelicals assessed and debated John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, their understandings of responsibility to submit to civil authority were also colored by notions of human rights based on the more abstract concept of higher law. Given the speed with which evangelical Christians acquiesced on this basis to the necessity of civil disobedience and even violent revolt in order to end slavery, their response to southern secession is even more remarkable. Less than two years after Brown's execution, northern evangelicals would display the importance of their commitment to America's Protestant Christian identity by rediscovering and employing the New Testament's teaching on submission to civil authority in their criticism of the South.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Condemning Political Rebellion: Northern Evangelicals Rebuke the South, 1860–1863**

The revivals of the Second Great Awakening had—in the minds of the most reform-oriented northern evangelicals—demonstrated that America was guilty of one great national sin: slavery. In their view, this blight on American character and justice stood in the way of attaining a national identity rooted in evangelical Protestant Christianity. As shown in the previous chapter, northern evangelicals had grown so committed to this goal by the 1850s that many had become willing to resist federal slave law in order to right the wrongs perpetrated by their countrymen against humanity. Some were even willing to violently oppose the institution of slavery by means of revolt against the government. Thus, it may be considered surprising that those who had come to accept civil disobedience or even rebellion in their resistance to federal slave law now criticized others for similar methods. But, in a nimble pivot, evangelicals in the North—even abolitionists who had so recently advocated violent opposition to federal slave law—quickly found a voice using biblical authority to criticize the South for rebelling against civil authority and seceding from the Union.

It might be tempting to count the swift hermeneutical reversal of northern evangelicals as merely a case of manipulating Holy Writ to support their current interests without regard for the integrity of their stated commitment to apply the Bible impartially. Such an explanation, however, fails to adequately account for the dramatic shift in opinion among this segment of American Christians who otherwise seemed to evidence sober and, on occasion, even self-sacrificing adherence to what they understood to be their biblical responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, to

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<sup>1</sup> I have in mind cases of hardship suffered by northern abolitionist evangelicals during the violent period of the mid-1830s through the 1840s, especially in—but not confined to—the Democratic, proslavery stronghold of New York City. In addition pages 165-166 and 169-170 in this dissertation, see Blight, *Passages to Freedom*, 85-87,

accuse a substantial portion of northern evangelicals of deliberately altering their reading of biblical texts to suit their political purposes discounts the significance of historical developments that had brought about a gradual and, in many cases, reluctant acceptance of civil disobedience to combat “Slave Power” during the previous decade. A better explanation takes into account the overarching desire of northern evangelicals to shape American identity in the image of Protestant Christianity. From their perspective, the South’s decision to secede removed the principle barrier to their wholehearted submission to federal authority, a submission that had grown untenable for many northern evangelicals in light of the Compromise of 1850 and its detested Fugitive Slave Law. Although four Border states remained in the Union with slavery permitted until the end of the Civil War, there was little question in the minds of most northern evangelicals that southern secession had, for all intents and purposes, taken slavery with it. The South’s rebellion served to purify the nation—now defined in terms of the remaining northern states—and removed the last major obstacle to a Christian national identity. Thus, northern evangelicals could wholeheartedly submit to what they once again judged to be the rightful authority of the federal government. In their opposition to slavery, they had hovered on the brink of rebellion and violence for several years, but Southern secession eliminated any legitimate excuse for further civil disobedience. Ironically, secession could be decried at the same time as itself an act of rebellion, granting the North’s evangelical constituency sufficient justification to support a war to reunite the nation under truer Christian principles.<sup>2</sup>

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97-98; Claudine L. Ferrell, *The Abolitionist Movement* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 55-58; Stewart, *Holy Warriors*, 50-83.

<sup>2</sup> Historians often generalize the views of North and South at the time of Lincoln’s election, noting that many in both sections conceived of two “nations” having already emerged within the American republic. For example, see Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 172-174. Without entering the well-traversed debate on the merits of northern or southern perceptions, I offer a more precise observation for the purpose of this essay. Northern evangelicals viewed southern secession as both “nationally” purifying and biblically indefensible.

### **Hopes and Fears of the 1860 Election**

More than anything else, the election of a Republican, Abraham Lincoln, to the presidency in 1860 precipitated the fateful wave of southern secession. Historian Steven A. Channing describes the election as “the magic key to secession.” According to Channing, “The Republican party had played an important role in intensifying the very fears which would produce secession; now, perhaps fittingly, the long feared success of that party in the 1860 Presidential election could be the issue upon which disunion would be accomplished.”<sup>3</sup> It is also necessary to observe that, in their dispute over the future of slavery, antislavery agitators in the North and apologists for slavery in the South both drew the same conclusion from Lincoln’s election. Each expected the election to hasten the destruction of the South’s social and economic system based on human bondage. But viewing the same event inversely, as in a mirror, northern evangelicals reacted with a surge of hope, utterly contrary to southern fears about a Lincoln presidency. Led by South Carolina, and fortified by so-called “firebreathers” across the South, one by one, slave states determined to secede rather than face the anticipated reorganization of their society within the Union. Professor Charles B. Dew of Williams College argues that these “Apostles of Disunion” genuinely feared the consequences of a Republican in the Whitehouse. In his brief but outstanding survey of southern secession commissioners, Williams concludes, “The commissioners sent out to spread the secessionist gospel in late 1860 and early 1861 clearly believed that the racial fate of their region was hanging in the balance in the wake of Lincoln’s election. . . . Hesitation, submission—any course other than immediate secession—would place

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<sup>3</sup> Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 160.

both slavery and white supremacy on the road to certain extinction.”<sup>4</sup> Northern evangelicals reflected their fears, but in reverse. They, instead, held hopeful anticipation that Lincoln’s election foreshadowed an end to the nation’s great guilt.

Bishop Haven was born and raised in the Boston suburb of Malden, Massachusetts. Members of his family prided themselves on their connections to seventeenth-century Puritans on both sides of the family tree. To this heritage, according to biographer William B. Gravely, the Northern Methodist attributed his own “vision of progress and the duty of social responsibility.”<sup>5</sup> The Fugitive Slave Law, passed in conjunction with the Compromise of 1850, solidified in Haven’s mind his mission as an antislavery and social reformer. Just two months after its passage, while serving as Principal of Amenia Seminary in Amenia, New York, Haven delivered a passionate sermon titled, *The Higher Law*, in which he spelled out his convictions on the necessity for Christians to resist the Fugitive Slave Law’s demands.<sup>6</sup> By the time of Lincoln’s election in 1860, Haven had grown certain that the end of slavery was near at hand. In a sermon just days after the election, which he titled from the fifth-century Latin hymn, *TE DEUM LAUDAMUS* (or “God, We Praise You”), he continued to urge northern evangelicals to resist federal law and protect fugitive slaves, but his tone was optimistic. “For this glorious victory,” he exclaimed, “assures the speedy abolition of slavery.” The minister then clarified his meaning with remarkable prescience, “I say speedy, not with a few months, or a Presidential term, in

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<sup>4</sup> Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 80.

<sup>5</sup> Gravely, *Gilbert Haven, Methodist Abolitionist*, 14 cf. 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Haven, *National Sermons. Sermons, Speeches and Letters on Slavery and its War: from the Passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill to the Election of President Grant* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869), 1-32, HathiTrust Digital Library, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433081601159> (accessed July 7, 2016). See also, Gravely, *Gilbert Haven*, 11, 31-32.



view, but with only a few years, in comparison with its long life and wide dominion.”<sup>7</sup> With fresh optimism, northern evangelicals like Haven renewed their efforts to build a case for a realized Christian American identity, free from slavery. In order to press their advantage, they saw in southern defection the perfect opportunity to employ biblical language of submission to civil authority against the South.

Notwithstanding his unnecessarily acrimonious attitude toward evangelical Christians and their supposed culpability for the destructive consequences of the Civil War, University of North Carolina Professor David Goldfield aptly describes and offers insightful analysis of the political environment in America when Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln was elected president. “The 1860 presidential contest,” he summarizes, “occurred in a politically poisonous atmosphere.”<sup>8</sup> The Republican Party had absorbed smaller antislavery and nativist parties, the largest being the Free Soil Party, which had been itself a merger of the “Barnburners,” the “Conscience Whigs” and the “Liberty Party” between 1848 and 1854. Still, the Republicans could not be considered in any sense a national party, lacking as they did almost any support in the South. A number of scholars have noted the fractious impact that sectional church splits over the issue of slavery had on American politics.<sup>9</sup> But the manner in which northern evangelicals participated in Lincoln’s campaign also contributed to the divisive political environment and added an air of imminent spiritual significance to the contest. Goldfield explains, “Republican rallies exuded an evangelical fervor that blended religious and military pageantry much in the

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<sup>7</sup> Haven, *National Sermons*, 199.

<sup>8</sup> Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 8. I deal more thoroughly with Goldfield’s bitter treatment of antebellum evangelical antislavery efforts in the Conclusion of the present work.

<sup>9</sup> Carwardine, “Houses Divided: Evangelical Churches and the Sundering of the Union, 1857–61,” in *Evangelicals and Politics*, 279–318; Ahlstrom, “Slavery, Disunion, and the Churches,” in *Religious History*, 448–468.

manner of the Free Soil Party, though on a grander scale. They performed before a more receptive audience, as anti-slavery and, especially anti-southern sentiment had grown in the North since 1848.”<sup>10</sup> Republican campaign rallies in 1860 can accurately be described as a political-religious spectacle. Although admirably produced for the purpose of social change, they contributed to the sense of irreconcilable differences north and south.

The Democratic Party also fractured during the campaign of 1860. In April, a convention held in Charleston, South Carolina, ended ominously with no nominee when six Deep South States and Texas walked out over their failed bid to add a platform plank calling for a federal slave code in the territories. The following month, a small Constitutional Union Party met in Baltimore to nominate John Bell of Tennessee for president, representing their mostly border-state coalition. The last of the antebellum national parties—the Democrats—met again in June, also in Baltimore, only to split once more. Those who walked out nominated John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky. The faction that remained nominated Stephen A. Douglas.<sup>11</sup>

In the midst of the calamitous 1860 campaign, Georgia politician and future Confederate Vice President, Alexander Stephens, wrote a letter to the editor of *The Charleston Courier*, connecting both the extension of slavery and the political right of rebellion to the present political contest. Stephens represented—from the perspective of the South, at least—fearful, yet cooler heads attempting to create understanding between the divided sections of the country. He asserted that the long-standing “settled doctrine of the South” called for Congress to stay out of

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<sup>10</sup> Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 168-169.

<sup>11</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 213-216; Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 167-168; Phillip Shaw Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 12-17. McPherson and Goldfield each offer general overviews of the divisive developments in the Democratic Party between April and June of 1860. Paludan, focused on Lincoln’s rise in the Republican Party in 1860, only briefly contextualizes factions within the Democratic Party in relation to decisions made by the Supreme Court.

the question of “slavery in the Territories.” He rooted his assertion in historical context by hinting that any Congressional “intervention” contradicted the principle “that the war of the American Revolution was *fought in resistance* to the unjust claim of power on the part of the British Parliament.”<sup>12</sup> Some might have read this as a veiled threat, but Stephens probably meant his reference to revolution to elicit sympathy among those who had judged it right to revolt against oppressive government policies in the past. He expressed anxious concern that “There is a tendency everywhere, not only at the North, but at the South, to strife, dissension, disorder, and anarchy. It is against this tendency that the sober minded and reflecting men everywhere should now be called upon to guard.”<sup>13</sup> His plea fell on deaf ears, at least in the Lower South.

The hopes of evangelical abolitionists and the fears of the southern slaveholding class were anything but patently validated by the controversial election of Lincoln. In his compellingly argued analysis of nineteenth-century social and political history, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery*, McDaniel points out that “Even antislavery politicians like Lincoln suggested [before he became president] that American slavery could only end gradually and might well survive until the 1890s or beyond, while more radical abolitionists . . . faced threats, ostracism, and even physical violence.”<sup>14</sup> But, as the reactions of northern evangelicals like Haven and those of slaveholders in the Lower South showed, there was in both sections a sense that the election of a Republican antislavery candidate moved the pendulum of American social history

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander H. Stephens, “Hon. A. H. Stephens’ Letter,” *The Charleston Courier, Tri-Weekly* (Charleston, SC), 17 May 1860: n.p., Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://find.galegroup.com/er.lib.k-state.edu/ncnp/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=ksu&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&docId=GT3011007058&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0> (accessed June 17, 2016). This letter was widely re-printed in southern newspapers and is sometimes cited as being originally published on May 17 in *The Augusta Constitutionalist*. If so, it was concurrently published in *The Charleston Courier*, as cited here. Emphasis in original.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> McDaniel, *Problem of Democracy*, 4.

toward eventual emancipation for American slaves. Among southern states, South Carolina reacted first and most definitively to the November 1860 election of Lincoln. The *Charleston Mercury* declared, “The tea has been thrown overboard, the revolution of 1860 has been initiated.”<sup>15</sup> Just six weeks later, a state convention repealed their 1788 ratification of the U.S. Constitution and South Carolina seceded from the Union.<sup>16</sup> The following April, forces under the command of the State Militia bombarded and captured Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, marking the beginning of the Civil War.<sup>17</sup> By June 8, eleven states had seceded and formed the Confederate States of America. Historian David W. Blight highlights the intersection of abolitionist efforts to influence American politics with the events just described. “With Abraham Lincoln’s election as president in 1860,” he writes, “the full potential significance of the abolitionists’ long pilgrimage from *moral suasion* to *resistance* and (finally) to *insurrection* at

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<sup>15</sup> “The News of Lincoln’s Election,” *Charleston Mercury* 55 (Charleston, SC), 8 November 1860: 1, ProQuest, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://search.proquest.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/docview/507793538/pageviewPDF/DB015706570C4139PQ/1?accountid=11789> (accessed January 11, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> “We, the People of the State of South Carolina, in Convention assembled, do declare and ordain, and it is hereby declared and ordained, That the Ordinance adopted by us in Convention, on the twenty-third day of May, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-eight, whereby the Constitution of the United States of America was ratified, and also, all Acts and parts of Acts of the General Assembly of this State, ratifying amendments of the said Constitution, are hereby repealed; and that the union now subsisting between South Carolina and other States, under the name of the ‘The United States of America,’ is hereby dissolved.” South Carolina Convention (1860-1862), *Declaration of the Immediate Causes which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union; and the Ordinance of Secession* (Charleston: Evans and Cogswell, 1860), 11, Sabin Americana, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY3802616629&srchtp=a&ste=14> (accessed October 11, 2016). See also, “The 20th Day of December, in the Year of our Lord, 1860,” *Charleston Mercury* 55 (Charleston, SC), 21 December 1860: 1, ProQuest, <http://search.proquest.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/docview/507806174?accounted=11789> (accessed October 11, 2016); Barbara L. Bellows, “Of Time and the City: Charleston in 1860,” in *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 112 (July-October 2011): 157-172. Bellows contextualizes South Carolina’s secession within the history of Charleston and its famous elites, the Pinckney family.

<sup>17</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 272-274. The shelling of Fort Sumter by artillery under the command of South Carolina General P. G. T. Beauregard commenced on April 12, 1861, and ended with Union Major Robert Anderson’s surrender of the Fort at 2:30 p.m. the following day. Union forces were evacuated on April 14.

last became clear.”<sup>18</sup> Though he does not develop the concept, Blight’s depiction points to the close connection between abolitionists’ methodology and their political theory—or theology, in the case of evangelical abolitionists. In fact, that “pilgrimage,” to stay with Blight’s imagery, would take yet one more abrupt and surprising turn for northern evangelicals. After nearly a century seeking to understand the relevance and application of the New Testament concept of submission to civil authority in a republican context, northern evangelicals united around one certain application of the principle in Romans 13: southern secession constituted rebellion against “the powers that be.”

### **Northern Evangelical Condemnation of Southern Rebellion**

The debate between an evangelical abolitionist conception of American identity and other northern evangelicals more willing to compromise with slavery for the sake of the Union continued into the early months of 1861. Meanwhile, more southern states began to follow South Carolina’s lead in secession. Spirited arguments occasionally spilled onto the pages of abolitionist newspapers like William Lloyd Garrison’s, *The Liberator*. Though Garrison’s evangelical commitment had waned, a majority of contributors and readers of the *Liberator* evidenced evangelical sentiment in their analysis and condemnation of slavery. Nevertheless, not all were convinced that the paper’s editorial slant on the South was valid. Only a week before the attack on Fort Sumter, one religiously offended reader penned his dissatisfaction with an editorial the previous month entitled, “Treason.” Obviously hoping that the crisis might still be resolved peacefully and constitutionally, the reader expressed “mingled regret and surprise” that the paper not only dogmatically applied the term “treason” to secession, but also called ungraciously for similar branding and condemnation of any in the North who did not agree.

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<sup>18</sup> Blight, *Passages to Freedom*, 92. Emphasis mine.

“Though you are my accuser,” he replied, “thank God you are not my judge, either in this world or in that which is to come.” *The Liberator’s* editorial defense consisted of reprinting its previous claim in context and challenging any detractors to invalidate “the logic or ethics” of the charge. According to Garrison, “If our correspondent chooses to transmute [the crimes of secessionists] into justifiable deeds, by his peculiar theory of government, we can only regret his confusion of mind in so plain a case.”<sup>19</sup> Garrison certainly did not stand alone in challenging any “theory of government” that permitted secession from a legitimate national government. And the biblical principle of submission to civil authority served as an essential ligament binding northern evangelical political theories.

In his definitive study of *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*, Carwardine distinguishes between “conservative evangelicals,” who were willing to compromise with slave states in the 1850s for the sake of their religious influence in the Union, and “staunchly antislavery evangelicals,” who increasingly accepted the necessity of civil disobedience to secure what could be called a more perfect Christian identity for America. For example, he subsumes “conservative evangelicals” like Charles Hodge (1797–1878), the influential principal of Princeton Theological Seminary, within a broader category of “conservative Unionists,” whom he describes as having a “deep respect for ‘the powers that be.’”<sup>20</sup> But without following up on his reference to Romans 13:1, Carwardine permits his allusion to the role of the biblical concept of submission to civil authority to remain undefined as a factor in the thinking of evangelicals of

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<sup>19</sup> B. G. Wright, “Treason,” *The Liberator* 31 (Boston, MA), 5 April 1861: 54, ProQuest, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://search.proquest.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/docview/91068120?accountid=1189> (accessed June 7, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 311.

any stripe. This study has sought to explain the substance and salience of evangelical understandings of that concept.

For the purpose of the current discussion, however, Carwardine admits that South Carolina's attack on Fort Sumter "radically altered the terms of debate" between evangelical abolitionists and more conservative antislavery evangelicals. He contends that President Lincoln's response to the attack, calling for decisive action against the rebellion, "swiftly re-cemented the fracturing consensus of northern Protestants."<sup>21</sup> Most helpfully, Carwardine points toward America's Christian identity as the overarching concern of all northern evangelicals in 1860. As has been shown, this was of central importance to evangelicals during previous decades as well, regardless of their understanding of the requirement to submit to civil authority. As Hodge opined in an essay in the *Princeton Review* in January of 1861, "If any other consideration be needed to justify the discussion, in these pages, of the disruption of this great confederacy, it may be found, not only in the portentous consequences of such disruption to the welfare and happiness of the country and to the general interests of the world, but also in its bearing on the Church of Christ and the progress of his Kingdom."<sup>22</sup> In other words, Hodge considered any disruption to the peace and progress of the United States as a disruption to God's kingdom's work in the world. Hodge judged this in large part by the prevalence and similarity of Christian influence across competing sections of the nation. He concluded a list of unifying features defying the sectional divide by declaring, "Moreover, there is no denomination of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 312. Other scholars have verified that the attack on Fort Sumter galvanized northern evangelicals in favor of putting down southern "rebellion." See David Rolfs, *No Peace for the Wicked: Northern Protestant Soldiers and the American Civil War* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 21-32, 129. On Lincoln's official actions in response to the bombardment of Fort Sumter in American religious perspective, see Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Alter of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Hodge, "The State of the Country," *Princeton Review* (January 1861): 1, HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t9q241406;view=1up;seq=5> (accessed July 11, 2016).

Christians whose members are not found in every part of our common country.”<sup>23</sup> Hodge clearly yearned to undermine every southern justification for secession that he could and to reverse the tide of disunion, even if it meant coming perilously close to sounding like an apologist for slavery itself, which he was not. Demonstrating the “conservative” character of his political views, as well as his determination to maintain the influence of Christianity on a united nation, Hodge sided in sympathy with the South against northern evangelical abolitionist declarations of the sinfulness and criminal nature of slavery. “It must be admitted,” he wrote, “that this is a grievance under which the South has laboured and is still labouring.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, without quoting Romans 13 or any other biblical text directly, Hodge asserted that those whose conscience was offended by slavery nevertheless had an absolute moral obligation to submit to constitutional provisions and the Fugitive Slave Law.<sup>25</sup> Despite these and other concessions to southern complaints, the eminent scholar and apologist of the conservative evangelical Calvinism known as Princeton Theology allowed none of the South’s arguments in favor of secession to be reasonable.<sup>26</sup> Rather than accepting the assertion of secession as another American revolution, he equated it with “treason” and warned that “the blood and misery which may attend the dissolution of the confederacy must lie mainly at the door of those who for selfish ends labour to effect it, who wish for disunion as a means of prosperity.”<sup>27</sup> Quoting James Moorhead’s 1978

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 11 cf. 14. Hodge succumbed to unreasonable optimism regarding northern and southern evangelical agreement on the basic moral assessment of slavery when he argued, “There is no material difference of opinion on the subject of slavery among the intelligent Christian people of this country. There are extremists North and South, but the mass of the people are of one mind.”

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>26</sup> For Princeton’s role in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American theology, see Mark A. Noll, *The Princeton Theology 1812–1921* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Hodge, “The State of the Country,” 35.



monograph approvingly, Carwardine argues that conservative and abolitionist evangelicals “united against the demonic slave power in ‘a great people’s war for Christian democracy’ and for a Union that ‘had been rehabilitated and suffused with new moral vitality.’”<sup>28</sup> Despite Hodge’s harsh criticism of evangelical abolitionists, his treatise supports this historical construction. The crucial catalyst for a fusion of evangelicals remains obscure in Carwardine’s otherwise lucid analysis. I argue that the catalyst emanated largely from northern evangelical understandings of the New Testament’s command to submit to civil authority.

Like the Methodist minister, Gilbert Haven, George Duffield, Jr. (1818-1888), came from an “old” American family. His great grandfather, also named George Duffield (1732-1790), was instrumental in leading a New Side faction in the late-1750s to leave the Presbyterian congregation at Meeting House Springs and establish a more distinctly evangelical Presbyterian church in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. During pastorates in the Carlisle church and later in the Old Pine Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, the first George Duffield proved himself a vocal proponent of the American Revolution as well as the evangelical gospel, stirring such irritation among British authorities that they offered a reward for his capture. He married the sister of Revolutionary General John Armstrong, who was an elder in his church, and served as a chaplain of the Continental Congress during the War for Independence.<sup>29</sup> It is clear that the first George Duffield saw no contradiction between the Bible’s command to “be subject unto the higher authorities” and revolt against British rule in America.

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<sup>28</sup> Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 312. See also James Moorehead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 35-41.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Tritt, “Who Were the Duffields?” (Web), First Presbyterian Church of Carlisle, Our History, <http://www.firstprescarlisle.org/our-history/the-duffields> (accessed August 1, 2016).

The Duffield heritage of evangelical Christian commitment continued for more than a century, and so did the family's loyalty to the government of the United States. Four out of five generations of Duffields between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars contributed pastors for Presbyterian churches across the North from New York to Michigan. Great-grandson, George Duffield, Jr., was particularly active in revivals of the Second Great Awakening and took special interest in the theological implications of southern secession. In an 1861 sermon titled, *The God of Our Fathers*, he displayed his evangelical enthusiasm by reviewing instances of revival in America as "tokens of divine favor." Highlighting their geographical scope, he recalled what he considered to be evidence of God's special attention to the United States, including "Great Awakening in the East in 1734; the 'Old Revival' in the West and South in 1800; the no less powerful revival of 1831 in the New and Middle States; and more than all, the Pentecostal year of 1858, when copious showers of divine grace covered, to some extent, the entire country!"<sup>30</sup> Consistent with his own heritage and the interests of many northern evangelicals, Duffield also held a passionate concern for America's identity, desiring that it adopt the character and faith of a Christian nation. He saw the outbreak of hostilities between southern states and the federal

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<sup>30</sup> George Duffield, Jr., *The God of Our Fathers, An Historical Sermon Preached in the Coates' Street Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, on Fast Day, January 4, 1861* (Philadelphia: T. B. Pugh, 1861), 12, HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t5t72sm7r;view=1up;seq=9> (accessed July 20, 2016). Revivals beginning with what Duffield calls the "Old Revival" have often been grouped together under the banner of the Second Great Awakening. The revivals in "the West and South in 1800" mark the earliest starting point for a Second Great Awakening and are called the "Great Revival" by historian J.B. Boles in his outstanding study (see Bibliography). Duffield's reference to 1831 identifies a high point of the revivals led by Charles G. Finney and others. Duffield's use of "Pentecostal" in association with 1858 does not denote the Pentecostal theological movement, which grew later, but compares the powerful influence of the 1857-1858 "Businessmen's" or "New York Prayer" Revival to what occurred in the New Testament's account of Pentecost in Acts 2. On this outburst of revivalism, see Kathryn T. Long, *The Revival of 1857-58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); J. Edwin Orr, *The Event of the Century: The 1857-1858 Awakening*, ed. Richard Owen Roberts (Wheaton: International Awakening Press, 1989); Gary K. House, *The 1858 Prayer Revival [microform]: A History and Evaluation of Its Impact on New York City* (Portland: Microfilm Service Co., 1987, 1988).

government in April 1861 as an opportunity to repurpose biblical injunctions against political rebellion and use them in condemnation of the South.

In a footnote, Duffield wrote on the relevance of Romans 13:1-7 to his message: “On this passage, thousands of sermons were preached on the ‘Supremacy of the Laws,’ during the prevalence of ‘Mob-Law’ in 1838, 1844, and especially in 1850. We suggest that they might now be repeated to great advantage with a *new application*.”<sup>31</sup> His language indicates that he had felt the sting of criticism from those who had used biblical admonitions about civil authority to warn northern antislavery advocates during the past few decades against resisting federal slave law. But now, Duffield argued, contrary to the experience of his forefathers during the Revolutionary War or his contemporaries opposing the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, the South had initiated an unjustified revolt against legitimate civil authority. At issue, Duffield believed, was the legitimacy of the government in question. And to judge that legitimacy, he appealed first to the biblical purpose of government found in Romans 13:4: “for he is the minister of God to thee for good.” According to Duffield:

To justify a rebellion, a Government must be so bad as to fail of its just end; its injustice so great that it would be preferable to endure civil war; there must be no prospect that grievances can be redressed peaceably; there must be a good hope of the firm establishment of a better Government; there must be some reasonable expectation of eventual success; otherwise, the imperative duty of ‘the Powers that be,’ in reference to such rebellion, is to PUT IT DOWN.<sup>32</sup>

His implied understanding of England’s Parliament in 1776 and the U.S. Congress in 1850 contrasted with his understanding of the federal government after Lincoln’s election. Because the authorities in those previous cases had failed to fulfill God’s requirements as “ministers . . . for good,” they could be justly resisted by American Christians. In his estimation, however, there

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<sup>31</sup> Duffield, *God of Our Fathers*, 39. Emphasis in original.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40. Emphasis in original.

was no such justification in 1861. Something had recently changed that restored the federal government's legitimacy and categorized southern secession as biblically unjustifiable. The only reasonable explanation for the change he perceived would have been the election of an avowedly antislavery president. In the minds of northern evangelicals like Duffield, Lincoln's election renewed hope that the nation's identity could be shaped in the image of Protestant evangelical Christianity and, thus, tipped the scales of legitimate authority in favor of the federal government.

On a day designated for prayer and fasting in September, 1861, Pastor William R. Gordon (1811-1897) preached a sermon at the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in Schraalenburgh, New Jersey. In the sermon he sought to bring spiritual strength to the nation now embarked on civil war. For cultural historians, Gordon's text is worth exploring for glimpses of northern evangelical perspectives on the topic of submission to civil authority as the Civil War got underway. The minister's influence spread far wider than his local congregation. His convictions led him not only to preach but to publish sermons and book-length treatises on topics of evangelical concern such as the deity of Christ, the reliability and authority of the Bible, the reception of eternal life through faith in Christ, and, perhaps the most helpful to contextualize his contribution to the present study, the nature of the millennial kingdom as prophesied in the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, he was quite prolific, having published more than a dozen works during his lifetime.<sup>33</sup> His September message dealing with the nation's plight was not his first sermon that year devoted to the sectional crisis, for he had already marked another day of

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<sup>33</sup> For a list of library holdings authored or co-authored by William Robert Gordon, see *WorldCat Identities*, <http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n88115690>.

fasting and prayer in January by addressing the perilous circumstances of the strife that had poisoned national politics.

He began in a fashion typical of New England Congregational ministers for many decades, comparing the contemporary American political situation to the division of the ancient Hebrew kingdom after Solomon's death, and especially with the later kingdom of Judah under Ahaz. But his jeremiad differs in important ways from earlier Puritan models. The evangelical Dutch Reformed pastor moved quickly away from parallels in the prophet Isaiah's time to look for analogies in the American Revolutionary Era. To stress how unusual the times were, he called the congregation to witness that he had "not discussed any subject of state policy, nor any political question of the day" during his tenure until the secession crisis that year. As noted, this was at least his second sermon devoted to the crisis in the past nine months. The current events, he insisted, called for an imitation of "the Church in the revolutionary days of our Republic."<sup>34</sup> For Gordon, the contemporary conflict with the South entailed one great reality, and that was the rebellion of southern states. He exhorted his fellow Unionists to rely on God for the simple fact that secession constituted nothing less than rebellion against God and His established order of civil government. As such, it behooved the North to remain faithful and receive God's blessing in the fight. Quoting Romans 13:1-2, Gordon concluded "that a man who, from any consideration, would be a traitor to his country, would by that fact become a traitor to his God; for God has made men the subjects of civil government, and their political duties he has prescribed in plain, direct, and imperative language."<sup>35</sup> Showing typical evangelical confidence

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<sup>34</sup> Gordon, *Reliance on God, our Hope of Victory* (1861), 7. See also, William R. Gordon, *The Peril of Our Ship of State: A Sermon on the Day of Fasting and Prayer, January 4th, 1861* (New York: John A. Gray, 1861), Sabin Americana, Gale, Kansas State University Libraries, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY100174840&srchtp=a&ste=14> (accessed August 11, 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Gordon, *Reliance on God*, 8-9.

in the immediate applicability of Scripture to contemporary circumstances, the minister asserted that the New Testament's teaching represented the "politics" of the Apostle Paul and constituted the foundational principle of all human government. Consequently, he felt it his duty to preach and apply this text along with others of similar content to the present situation.<sup>36</sup>

Gordon offered an argument for submission to civil authority that appealed directly to an evangelical view of American identity. Comparing the political circumstances during which Paul wrote his letter to the Romans with contemporary southern dissatisfaction over federal authority in America, he asked, "Now, if such were the directions to Christians under heathen governments, how much more are they binding upon the subjects of a government whose policies and laws *are* regulated by the principles of the Gospel[?]"<sup>37</sup> Gordon's use of present tense verbs along with references to current "policies" in this section of his sermon suggests that his confidence in America's "Gospel" orientation had at least solidified with the election of President Lincoln and the triumph of social reform that it implied. Here was the definitive reason that the South could not be justified in their actions and that New Testament admonitions to be subject to civil authority could not be abrogated under the current circumstances. Even if they had not yet been fully realized, Gordon's exhortation demonstrates that, in his eyes, northern evangelical hopes for shaping America's identity in accordance with Protestant Christian values promised shortly to be fulfilled. To resist civil authority and rend the nation apart at the very threshold of apprehending this longed for reality was too much to be borne. Faced with an existential threat to evangelical hopes for the nation, he believed the North had no recourse but to respond to southern aggression with military force. He considered the rebellion to be "wicked,"

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<sup>36</sup> Gordon later quoted Titus 3:1 and 1 Peter 2:13 in support of his argument.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 9. Emphasis mine.

unjust, and “indefensible by reason and conscience.” Gordon minced no words, declaring that “the crime of high treason . . . covers and saturates the whole of our Southern Confederacy . . .” and concluding that “as [Romans 13:1-7] is a divine proclamation against treason, it is a guide to the pulpit in our expositions of the duties we owe to the State and Government under which we live.” Building to a rhetorical climax, the minister pointed to just one option available to the government for dealing with such traitorous members of the nation, and that was to employ “the sword” entrusted to civil authority. “The Apostle [Paul] declares,” he concluded, “that ‘Magistrates are for the *punishment* of evil-doers,’ . . .” regardless of their number.<sup>38</sup>

Tyranny was often a justification given by northern evangelical Christians for support of the War for Independence. Gordon, however, turned the notion of tyranny against the South in condemning secession. Ironically, he used the same clause from Romans 13:3-4 that northern evangelicals previously saw as allowing rebellion against an unjust British government as an argument condemning the South’s rebellion against federal authority. His basis for the reversal of application was that southern legislatures had voted for secession without referring the matter to their citizens for confirmation in a referendum.<sup>39</sup> Historian David Rolfs helpfully explains why arguments from ministers like Duffield and Gordon carried such profound significance in the North:

Since submission to established authority [based on Romans 13:1-7] was one of the cardinal principles of both Puritan and antebellum America, this was a particularly devastating *jus ad bellum* argument for Northern Christians because it undermined both the political and religious foundations of the Confederacy and hence justified the North’s immediate and forceful response. By convincing Northern believers that Southern secession was really lawless sedition, the Northern clergy effectively transformed the South’s “conservative, preemptive counter-revolution” into a treacherous rebellion

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 17.

against a God-ordained government.<sup>40</sup>

It is noteworthy, moreover, that Gordon did not appeal to dominant early nineteenth-century Protestant theological views of eschatology that sought conformity to Old Testament patterns in order to reveal or usher in the Kingdom of Christ (e.g. amillennialism or postmillennialism).<sup>41</sup> Instead, he started from the doctrinal position of premillennialism, which was much less common at the time and relies little or not at all on Christian responsibility with regard to the Kingdom of Christ. Thus, he rooted his exhortations to northern evangelicals more in teachings from the New Testament that applied distinctly to the Church than on Old Testament examples equating the Church with the Kingdom of Israel. In recent decades, American religious historians have emphasized millennial views at the intersection of politics and religion in the nineteenth century, especially pointing to the rapid growth of postmillennial views associated with revivals of the Second Great Awakening. While these efforts have illuminated the religious context of American political culture during the antebellum period, ministers like Gordon remind us that postmillennialism alone did not contribute to the heightened involvement of American evangelicals in political causes. Nor was a more traditional Reformed—amillennial—commitment to societal redemption necessary to induce Protestants to pursue a distinctly Christian identity for the United States.

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<sup>40</sup> Rolfs, *No Peace for the Wicked*, 69.

<sup>41</sup> Eschatology, from the Greek word, *εσχατος* or “last things,” is that branch of theology that deals with biblical predictions concerning the future, with emphasis on the return of Christ and the nature of His Kingdom. Christian views on the subject especially manifest themselves in history by various understandings of the relationship between the Church and the State. See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 1153-1155, 1205-1217; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, abridged edition, John F. Walvoord, Donald K. Campbell, and Roy B. Zuck, eds., vol. 2 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1988), 355-361, 374-375. Goldfield argues that with the attack on Fort Sumter, “War had become a magic elixir to speed America’s millennial march, no longer the destroyer of lives or the waster of lands.” Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 205.



As previously noted, George Peck came from an evangelical American family who supported revolution in 1776, and he also opposed southern secession in 1861, largely on the basis of the call to civil submission in Romans 13:1-2. Peck, a Methodist evangelist who rode preaching circuits before settling as a pastor in Scranton, Pennsylvania, reveled in his connections to Patriot ancestors on both his mother's and father's sides of the family. According to Peck, both his grandfathers and at least three great uncles fought in the revolt against British rule. His grandfathers both died in the conflict, one, Peck declared with pride, at Valley Forge.<sup>42</sup> Yet, notwithstanding his boasted heritage of political rebellion, Peck's collection of wartime sermons includes a thoroughgoing refutation of the South's justification for secession, preached from an evangelical, biblical perspective in 1861. His extensive use of Romans 13:1-7 to make his case merits careful examination in pursuit of a clearer understanding of northern evangelical conceptions of submission to civil authority at the outset of the American Civil War.

In the second sermon of his collection, Peck stated his intention to provide “an application of the teachings of the apostle [Paul] to existing national affairs” and “to prove that the seceding states are guilty of the very crime which the apostle condemns.”<sup>43</sup> He focused on two elements of the Apostle Paul's teaching in Romans 13 in order to indict the South for its “unchristian” rebellion against the government of the United States. First, he argued that secession and the confiscation of federal properties by force (e.g. Fort Sumter) constituted what

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<sup>42</sup> Peck, *Life and Times of Rev. George Peck*, 9-13. Peck does not explain the circumstances of his grandfather Jesse Peck's death, except to say that he died “while the contest was still undecided” (p.10) It was his maternal grandfather (identified only by his last name, Collar, in George Peck's autobiography) who died at Valley Forge. The three great uncles on the Peck side of the family likewise suffered for American independence. The oldest died of smallpox and the other two were taken prisoner by the British and served in the notoriously brutal prison ship, *Jersey*, in the East River of New York City. Peck probably exaggerated little their ordeal when he wrote, “Here they suffered many deaths; and when they were at last released and carried home, they were so broken down in body and mind by disease and brutal treatment, that they were not able to recognize their own mother” (p.11).

<sup>43</sup> Peck, *Our Country*, 27.

Paul described in verse two as resisting “the powers [that be]” and, consequently, resisting “the ordinance of God.” Second, he argued that God’s sanction of the use of deadly physical force by government to preserve its legitimate authority imposed upon the federal government of the United States a responsibility to use that force in putting down southern rebellion. Underlying both applications of the text to the contemporary political crisis lay Peck’s conviction that America, under its present government, could and rightfully ought to become the kind of Christian nation that northern evangelicals hoped to forge.

On the question of whether secession constituted resistance to legitimate authority, Peck admitted that “An individual is indeed justified in refusing obedience to a law which is plainly contrary to the divine law,” but denied that the South could justify its course of action on this basis.<sup>44</sup> The three principle justifications for southern secession, in his view, failed to constitute an exception to the command of Romans 13:1. With reasonably objective brevity, Peck summarized the major complaints of the South, which they claimed vindicated their actions: northern states were dominated by abolitionists, they had refused to carry out the requirements of the Fugitive Slave Law, and Congress opposed admission of any more slave states into the Union.<sup>45</sup> The Methodist preacher’s basic answer to these claims was that in each case the duly ordered system of government made provision for redress of any perceived injustices done to them. Thus, secessionists were guilty of subverting the orderliness of civil authority. Because the South had not exhausted its opportunities for redress, Peck asked rhetorically, “what provisions of the federal compact would thereby be violated,” giving states legal or moral authority to break

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 28-30.

that compact permanently?<sup>46</sup> Instead, he charged the South with what he considered to be “the real cause of this rebellion.” The true origin consisted of southern realization that they could no longer dominate national policies in their favor, “and that henceforth their numbers and the justice of their cause are to be the measure [i.e. limits] of their power, and hence they pause, secede, and set up for themselves.”<sup>47</sup> In essence, the minister claimed, the South had refused to abide by the rule of law, but had instead resorted to ungodly rebellion to secure their selfish interests.

On the subject of whether federal authorities ought to use force to restore the Union, Peck’s rhetoric moved swiftly from apparently feigned reticence at the thought of taking a “sacred” human life to strident insistence that nations threatened with rebellion are obligated to respond with violence in their own defense. “A nation is justified,” he maintained, “in taking up the sword and entering the field of deadly strife when invaded by a foreign foe *or by bands of rebels*.”<sup>48</sup> But he developed his argument beyond merely acknowledging the justice of a violent reply to civil revolt. In response to southern rebellion, Peck believed it was the “solemn duty of the government” and the “nation” to bear “the sword” and “execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” as Romans 13:4 endorsed. In his view, “If the civil power ‘bears not the sword in vain,’ here is an occasion for its being drawn from the scabbard.”<sup>49</sup> From Peck’s reading of Romans 13, the South had crossed the biblical threshold into rebellion against legitimate civil authority. This fact not only justified a military response from the federal government, it demanded one.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 23. Emphasis mine.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

Necessary for both of Peck's basic conclusions regarding the relevance of biblical teaching "to existing national affairs" was his conviction that America's identity could yet be shaped in the image of evangelical Protestant Christianity. Progress toward this goal during decades of revival and reform movements had clearly bolstered his confidence that the nation held special promise from his religious perspective. Using secular terminology, Peck first hinted in the context of statements quoted above, at his concern that southern secession might thwart evangelical aspirations for the United States, declaring that "War is not to be compared with the loss of liberty *nor the annihilation of a nationality*."<sup>50</sup> His use of the term, nationality, in this context meant more than just national union, and should not be confused with ethnicity or race, for he clearly makes no such distinction between the white South and northern states. Rather, his use suggests a conception of national identity that had been and was still being constructed according to northern evangelicals, an identity that had come a long way toward conforming to the ideal Christian nation of their hopes. According to the fiery Methodist, there could be no more holy cause than fighting to preserve the Union, for America was "the best government that ever was constituted since the world began," and to refuse to bear arms against the rebels would result in "a retrogression of *Christian civilization* back into the dark ages."<sup>51</sup> It was this notion of Christian identity that persuaded Peck and other northern evangelicals to rally around the Union, defending the federal government's legitimacy in the face of southern defiance. And, it was a confidence in the nation's religious legitimacy as a civil state that condoned military force in defense of its continued cohesion in pursuit of righteous character.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 23. Emphasis mine.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 31, 35. Emphasis mine.

In 2008, Notre Dame PhD graduate, Grant Brodrecht, argued in his dissertation that Peck's vision for the Union, like other "mainstream" northern evangelicals, "was not synonymous with the civic-nationalist vision put forth by abolitionist evangelicals."<sup>52</sup> This overall assessment of Peck is correct. He was a politically "moderate" evangelical and a fervent unionist in the mold of Princeton president Charles Hodge, despite Peck's very different theological perspective in comparison to the Calvinist stance of Hodge. Peck's commitment to antislavery was longstanding and sincere, though unlike the majority of his Methodist peers, he questioned the wisdom of immediate abolition. But in Brodrecht's welcomed effort to show the crucial overlap between evangelical Christianity and northern devotion to the Union, he could be read as relegating distinctly evangelical (biblical) motivations to the abolitionist segment of nineteenth-century evangelical Christianity, from which he distances Peck and other so-called "moderate" evangelical unionists. As Peck's 1861 sermon on the subject demonstrates, however, his support for the Union and his vigorous opposition to southern "rebellion" sprung from complex motivations and sources, principally the New Testament command to "be subject unto the higher powers." Whatever the nuances of the Unionism of moderate and abolitionist northern evangelicals, therefore, both founded their condemnation of the South's rebellion on remarkably similar understandings of the biblical concept of submission to civil authority.

### **Conclusion**

Why did northern evangelicals find it so easy to move from condoning opposition to the federal government in the 1850s—at times even violent opposition—to condemning the South for its revolt against federal authority in 1860-1861? Ministers of various evangelical church

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<sup>52</sup> Grant Brodrecht, "'Our Country': Northern Evangelicals and the Union during the Civil War and Reconstruction" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2008), Abstract and 3-5, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304481439> (accessed August 8, 2016).

traditions in the North united around the hope that Abraham Lincoln's election spelled the doom of slavery. With an anticipation of slavery's demise, their confidence in the government's biblical legitimacy soared. From the perspective of this renewed hope in America's potential as a "truly" Christian nation, northern evangelicals could see no justification for the South's departure from the Union. Thus, they rhetorically pounded the South for having no biblical leg on which to stand.

Exploring the sense of "duty" among northern Christians who enlisted to fight in the Civil War, historian David Rolfs asks a question related to the one above: "But where had this overriding sense of personal obligation to a 'national' government come from and when had their secular Republic allegedly become a 'Christian' nation?"<sup>53</sup> His answer is acceptable as far as it goes, identifying as he does the influence of Puritan providential exceptionalism, the revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the disestablishment of state churches since the Republic was founded. And, though the measure of a "Christian" nation is anything but objective and various Christians in 1860 would have assessed the nation's identity differently in terms of religion, Rolfs is correct to challenge the notion that America had ever truly been a Christian state in the eyes of most evangelicals. As a matter of fact, a continuing desire to shape the nation in the image of Christ contributed to evangelical enthusiasm for service in the Union Army against southern "rebels." For among northern evangelical Christians, the sense that they were fighting out of a sense of duty sprung also from the biblical directive to submit to civil authority.

Indeed, the increased attention to biblical teaching on submission to civil authority among northern evangelicals in the early 1860s can best be understood in the context of their persistent commitment to shape American identity in the image of evangelical Protestant

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<sup>53</sup> Rolfs, *No Peace for the Wicked*, 53.

Christianity. One must bear in mind that evangelical revivals—known collectively as the Second Great Awakening—impacted a significant portion of the South beginning as early as 1800 and continued through the first half of the nineteenth century. According to noted Civil War historian James McPherson, “Union and Confederate soldiers alike were heirs of the Second Great Awakening.”<sup>54</sup> The same could be said of the majority of their families back home. This transformation of southern religion helped lay the groundwork for oft-noted religious characterizations of the Civil War by both sides in the conflict. Yale Professor of Religious History, Harry S. Stout, highlights the debate over the nation’s identity between evangelicals in the North and South by stressing that the Confederate Constitution deliberately defined the new association of states as a Christian nation.<sup>55</sup> For example, unlike its forebear, the United States Constitution, that of the Confederacy specifically includes in its preamble a phrase “invoking the favor and guidance of Almighty God.”<sup>56</sup> Though the Confederate Constitution also forbade religious tests for any office, it nonetheless offered an alternative approach to religion from its

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<sup>54</sup> James McPherson, “Afterward,” in *Religion and the American Civil War*, ed. Randall M. Miller et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 409. See also, John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 70-89; Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 415-471; Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 4, 220-226; Rolfs, *No Peace for the Wicked*, 21. Rolfs effectively summarizes statistical data gathered from the work of several historians to illustrate the influence of evangelical revivalism during the decades just prior to the Civil War. He writes, “An impressive array of statistics confirms this increasing nineteenth-century American preoccupation with evangelical Protestantism. At the turn of the century, there were roughly 5.3 million people living in the United States and less than 10 percent of them belonged to *any* church. By 1855, the population of the United States had expanded to 27 million, and despite the encroachments of Catholicism, Deism, Unitarianism, and Transcendentalism, more than 15 percent of them held membership in Protestant churches. While there had been more than a fivefold increase in population between 1800 and 1855, America’s *Protestant sects alone* enjoyed nearly an eightfold increase in membership, increasing from roughly half a million members in 1800 to nearly four million communicants by 1855. Although the country’s Protestant churches were by no means exclusively evangelical, the vast majority of this growth occurred in the evangelical wings of the Baptist, Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations. By 1855, the predominantly evangelical Methodist and Baptist churches alone accounted for nearly 70 percent of the nation’s Protestant membership.”

<sup>55</sup> Stout, *Upon the Alter of the Nation*, 47; Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 670-672; Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War*, 193; Rolfs, *No Peace for the Wicked*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Constitution of the Confederate States; March 11, 1861* (Web), The Avalon Project, Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/csa\\_csa.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_csa.asp) (accessed October 10, 2016).

largely secular counterpart in the North. Southern convention delegates intended this language to castigate the United States for having refused to self-identify religiously in 1789. What constituted a “true” Christian nation, therefore, was at the heart of the debate between the slave-holding South and the majority of northern evangelicals in 1860. But the decades of revivals that preceded the Civil War also provided evangelical Americans in both sections an intellectual field of battle on which to debate the topic. Years before the South seceded—boldly asserting its own religious superiority—the impact of evangelical revivals offered northern evangelicals a common religious narrative, vocabulary and authority from which to criticize southern resistance to federal authority. Occupying the New Testament terrain in Romans 13:1-7 commanding submission to civil authority, northern evangelicals found an effective vantage point from which to launch a barrage of chastisement on their southern “brethren.”



## Conclusion

In this work, two ideas have been explored that were crucial from the perspective of northern evangelical Christian participation in the American political system during its first century of development. The most prominent of these ideas has been that northern evangelical understandings at the intersection of their commitment to biblical authority and civil authority played a critical role in determining this religious group's contribution to American culture and politics. Yet the role that evangelical understandings of submission to civil authority played in guiding their political involvement has received little if any attention from scholars in the field of American religious history. Rolfs is generally correct in suggesting that "Perhaps one reason so many soldiers ultimately deferred to their God's 'inscrutable' judgments was because the United States' antebellum masses still widely subscribed to the old Puritan doctrine of submission."<sup>1</sup> But the present work has sought to demonstrate that such submission—to civil authority, at least—was not a foregone conclusion of American evangelical Christians from the Revolutionary era until the Civil War. Rather, while the import of biblical commands such as Romans 13:1 to "be subject unto the higher powers" remained unquestioned by northern evangelicals across the decades, the understanding of its relevance to contemporary circumstances morphed over time.

The second idea has been that evangelical aspirations and exertions to shape American identity according to their construal of biblical Christianity helped govern the limits of their submission to civil authority. Observing that evangelicals sought to shape American identity in their own image is not particularly novel in the study of nineteenth-century American culture, but I argue that its significance as an interpretive tool for understanding late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century U.S. political history has been understated in historiography. Indeed, the

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<sup>1</sup> Rolfs, *No Peace for the Wicked*, 121.

persistent guiding factor in determining whether northern evangelical commitment to submission to civil authority waxed or waned was their perception of what was necessary to assure progress in the quest for America's Protestant evangelical character and identity. Moreover, the interplay of commitment to biblical and civil authority in northern evangelical readings of Christianity both enabled and helps to explain their vital contribution to the political stability of the United States during the first transformative century of its existence.

At the end of the French and Indian War (1763), British colonists began a dramatic and swift transformation of their identities that diminished loyalties to the Crown, and created a fledgling sense of community as "Americans" across previously disparate colonies on the eastern seaboard of North America. Thus, historian Fred Anderson accurately characterizes the event as *The War That Made America*.<sup>2</sup> In concurrence with Anderson's monograph, my analysis does not demand acknowledgement of a single American identity at any time during the history of the United States. Indeed, I would not accept such a notion in any absolute sense. Rather, I maintain that northern evangelical attempts to shape the nation's collective identity constituted a vital part of American cultural and political development from the Revolutionary period through the Civil War. Moreover, the role played by pastors and other religious leaders was crucial to these efforts, and their involvement necessitated that they accommodate biblical teaching regarding civil authority, whether that involvement promoted submission or resistance.

Northern evangelicals of the Revolutionary Era, like Backus, found a way to justify political revolt without compromising the authority of biblical commands to submit to civil authority. They accomplished this by interpreting Romans 13:1 using verses three and four as qualifiers of the obligation to submit. Making the case that the King and Parliament had failed in

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson, *War That Made America*, xix-xxv, 243-248, 259-262.

their God-given responsibilities, northern evangelical ministers became willing to entertain the necessity of independence from Great Britain. Then, arguing that an American republic would surely lead to a desirable end, the furtherance of the gospel via establishment of a Christian nation, most northern evangelicals of this generation promoted the Revolution.

Having embarked on a course of support for American independence, evangelical ministers in the North proved themselves to be loyal defenders of the federal government against early challenges to its authority. Using the command of Romans 13:1 to “be subject unto the higher powers,” they consistently opposed early critics of federal authority, even those who rebelled on the basis of similar complaints raised earlier against British rule. The key difference, they argued, was the inherent superiority of republicanism as a form of government. If this was the most worthy form of human government, they insisted, then surely the United States qualified under the New Testament’s description of civil authority as “ordained of God.” Thus, appealing to the same key passage as had been used to justify revolt against Great Britain, northern evangelical leaders rallied around the federal authority of the United States.

The enamorment of northern evangelical ministers with republicanism suffered a series of setbacks around the turn of the nineteenth century. First, the French Revolution presented a more violent, authoritarian and seemingly anti-Christian picture of republican government. Then, within a few years following the disturbing turn of events in France during and after the Terror, a Francophile known to be critical of evangelical Christian doctrine and promoting a more radical brand of republican politics was elected President of the United States. For a while, it looked as if the support enjoyed by the nation from this quarter might evaporate. But, though establishment evangelicals in the North continued to be vexed by Thomas Jefferson’s presidency, both they and non-conforming evangelicals such as Baptists and Methodists decided that their energies would

be more profitably engaged in the work of revival—converting the masses—than in political maneuvering. In this way, submission to civil authority became a means to an end, which was to build a national evangelical identity from the ground up, with the expectation that converted citizens would enhance the dignity of the government to which they submitted.

Although questions regarding legitimate political authority did occasionally surface during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, after the presidency of Jefferson these were not common concerns of northern evangelicals. When a question of submission to civil authority arose, it was either summarily dismissed as a settled doctrine under the principles of elective government or it was affirmed briefly with scriptural support before reasserting the importance of spiritual revival for the future of the nation. The revivals known collectively as the Second Great Awakening realigned the focus of northern evangelicals from political to spiritual concerns. But as renewed waves of revivalism swept westward across the country in the late-1820s, led by Charles G. Finney and proponents of his “new methods,” northern evangelicals began to encounter fresh challenges to civil authority based on increased urgency for societal reform. Abolitionism became the most passionate and politically disruptive of the reform initiatives carried forward by evangelical revivalism. Although Finney was very reluctant to adopt any form of civil disobedience in hopes of ending what he firmly proclaimed “sinful,” others around him found clear justification in his doctrinal stance against slavery to test the limits of submission to civil authority. Students at Oberlin College in Ohio, where Finney served as professor and then president, responded to the evangelist’s reformist message by preaching the cause of abolition alongside and as passionately as the gospel of Christ. But the crisis that spurred many northern evangelical abolitionists like those in Oberlin to oppose civil authority directly developed in response to reinvigorated fugitive slave laws, first in Ohio (1839) and then

nationally (1850). These laws confronted northern evangelical convictions not only by permitting the institution of slavery where it already existed but by requiring residents of free states to assist in the capture and return of those who escaped. From the perspective of many northern evangelicals, fugitive slave laws set up a classic conflict between what God commanded of Christians and what the government required. In such cases, the Bible taught that Christians must follow a “higher law,” and “obey God rather than men.” By appealing to higher law in opposition to state and federal fugitive slave statutes, Finney created moral space for evangelical abolitionists to resist civil authority in opposition to the institution of slavery. Having sought unsuccessfully for nearly three decades to crush racial injustice in America by preaching the gospel of Christ and the cause of antislavery, northern evangelical abolitionists in the mid-1850s came to the brink of civil disobedience and even violence in opposition to slavery.

By the last few years of the decade, northern evangelicals of many stripes openly discussed the expedience of resisting federal slave law with force. Black evangelicals and students from Oberlin College—male and female—were especially vocal in promoting a forceful opposition to federal law. They did so cognizant that blocking the work of slave catchers, assisting slaves to escape to freedom or fighting pro-slavery elements in Kansas Territory not only contradicted a plain reading of the biblical command to be subject to civil authorities, but also constituted a threat to southern interests and, thus, to national unity, which the Compromise of 1850 had been intended to secure. The reform-oriented message of evangelical revivalism and a theory of higher law applied to the interpretation of biblical texts provided a theological justification for disregarding the central command of civil submission found in Romans 13:1.

John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 was not the only example of civil disobedience by northern evangelical abolitionists in the last years of the decade, but it was

certainly the most explosive. Despite the fact that some evangelical abolitionists had moved over the past decade to the brink of civil revolt against the institution of slavery, most northern evangelicals initially found Brown's violent and arguably treasonous incursion horrifying. The event thus highlighted an uncomfortable reality for northern evangelicals. Over the past two decades, previously compatible evangelical goals had begun to collide. They could no longer easily work alongside the federal government to construct a Christian national identity, and at the same time work to terminate the national sin of slavery, because Congress seemed determined to protect the institution of slavery in the nation.

By identifying the challenge posed by the new incompatibility of northern evangelical goals, one can begin to understand more clearly why, within a short time, their assessments of Brown and his intentions came under much kinder scrutiny. Although debate concerning the Harpers Ferry raid was intense for a while among northern evangelicals, few expressed any real discomfort with its obvious contradiction to the New Testament's teaching on submission to civil authority. Northern evangelical women and blacks especially came to the defense of Brown's intentions, if not always his methods. I argue that Brown and others skillfully correlated other passages of the New Testament to justify his radical actions on the basis of a higher law than civil authority, to which Christians must conform when incompatibility arises. In this way, higher law theory engulfed the notion of obedience to civil authority. Evangelical sermons and church bells across the north already commemorated Brown as a martyr of the faith by the time he was hanged just weeks later.

Given the volatile emotions swirling around antislavery and pro-slavery ideologies in America as the 1850s came to a close and the willingness of a large and vocal segment of northern evangelicals to entertain civil disobedience or even violence in opposition to laws

governing slavery in the United States, it would have been hard to predict the sudden burst of enthusiasm and support for federal authority beginning in late-1860 and early-1861. Two well-covered events in the history of America in the nineteenth century turned northern evangelical Christians in short order from courting to condemning political rebellion. The crucial events bringing about an evangelical change of heart in the North were Abraham Lincoln's election to the presidency (1860) and southern secession in reaction to his election (1861). Occurring as they did in quick succession, these two factors changed the calculus nourishing northern evangelical understandings of submission to civil authority, and led those who had recently challenged federal authority to suddenly condemn other Americans for doing the same.

The election of Lincoln brought as much hope to northern evangelicals as it did fear to southern slaveholders. His avowedly antislavery stance helped convince evangelical abolitionists in particular that they could once again throw their support behind the federal government. But their cooperation was by no means certain until secessionists convinced eleven states, beginning with South Carolina, that their best hope of protecting the society they had built on slave labor was outside the Union. Ironically, by placing themselves in rebellion against the federal government, slave states freed northern antislavery evangelicals to yield their unqualified submission to federal authority. From northern evangelical Christian perspective, the South's withdrawal had at once purified the nation of the scourge of slavery that—almost singularly—prevented it from attaining a truly Christian identity, and at the same time offered an opportunity to finish constructing that Christian identity with a war to reunite the nation in freedom. Of course, to take advantage of the opportunity to shape American identity in the image of Protestant evangelical Christianity now required northern evangelicals to promote submission to the newly legitimized authority of the federal government. They did so by reasserting the

command to “be subject unto the higher powers” found in Romans 13:1, and by condemning the South for acting in disobedience to that biblical command.

According to Professor David Goldfield of the University of North Carolina, the great “failure” of the Civil War was that “The political system could not contain the passions stoked by the infusion of evangelical Christianity into the political process, and above all slavery assumed moral dimensions that confounded political solutions.” He goes on to describe evangelical participation in the political debate surrounding slavery as an “invasion” of the American political process with “especially toxic” effects that limited the range of options available to politicians seeking to resolve the crisis that slavery precipitated.<sup>3</sup> In context, his declarations smack of a conspiracy theory, though one based on religious beliefs and worldview instead of on consciously aligned conspirators. But he also neglects the fact that northern evangelical involvement in the American political process was hardly new in the history of the nation, let alone an “invasion.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, his analysis fails to explain why northern evangelicals seemed to vacillate in their support of the federal process that he argues could not find a way to peacefully solve the dispute over American slavery. His work is representative of

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<sup>3</sup> Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 1, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3, 6, 10. Goldfield admits that he might be read as offering a “pro-southern analysis of the war,” though he denies this characterization. I would argue that a reasonable critic can be forgiven for thinking this to be true when he reads that the author finds antebellum evangelical “religious immersion” troubling due to “the blindness of its self-righteousness, its certitude, and its lack of humility to understand that those who disagree [about slavery] are not mortal sinners and those who subscribe to your views [on abolition] are not saints.” While he quickly asserts that holding an antislavery position was, in some undefined way, “righteous,” the effect of his comments is to reject any legitimate urgency in the 1850s to end the institution. Goldfield lays blame for the necessity of a war to end slavery at the feet of evangelical abolitionists, and decidedly not at those of slavery’s defenders in the South. But, no matter how the argument is nuanced, I find this interpretation both disturbing and perplexing in the face of a preponderance of evidence showing southern intransigence on the slave issue. For example, see: Potter, “Southern Maneuvers on the Eve of Conflict,” in *Impending Crisis*, 385-404; Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, 55-57, 95-98, 108-112, 127-130, 141-166; William E. Gienapp, “The Crisis of American Democracy: The Political System and the Coming of the Civil War,” and William W. Freehling, “The Divided South: Democracy’s Limitations, and the Causes of the Peculiarly North American Civil War,” in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Why the Civil War Came* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 81-175; Dew, *Apostles of Disunion*, 74-81.



broader American historiography that has not given sufficient attention to the interplay between concepts of biblical and civil authority that shaped evangelical political involvement during the first century of American history. This essay offers a corrective to that deficiency.

An appropriate closing date for the purpose of the current discussion falls, conveniently, one-hundred years after the end of the French and Indian War, when another dramatic and swift transformation of American identity was announced—literally—by Abraham Lincoln. At the high point of the American Civil War, Lincoln declared to be legal reality regarding the nation's identity what most northern evangelicals had sought for decades through religious and political means. The president of the United States proclaimed the vast majority of America's slaves to be free, once and for all. One can hardly imagine a more traumatic shift in expectations concerning a fundamental dispute over American identity during the previous century than Lincoln's emancipation declaration. While its implementation in January of 1863 did not end the institution of slavery everywhere in America, it indicated that a northern victory would mean slavery would never again be tolerated in the Union.<sup>5</sup>

As a postlude to Finney's thinking in the matter of evangelical Christianity and slavery, it is significant that he reflected after the war with continued surety about the potential efficacy of revival to have prevented it. In the 1868 edition of his *Lectures on Revivals*, he added, "Upon the question of slavery the church was too late in her testimony to avoid the war. But the slaveholders were much alarmed and exasperated by the constantly growing opposition to their institution through out all that region of the north where revival influences had been felt. They

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<sup>5</sup> The National Archives Online features a digital copy of Lincoln's executive order, the Emancipation Proclamation, with commentary at <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation>. Lincoln's proclamation only applied to slaves in states currently in rebellion against the federal government. Border slave-states of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware had remained in the Union and were not subject to the proclamation freeing slaves.

took up aims [sic] to defend and perpetuate the abomination, and by doing so abolished it.”<sup>6</sup> He laid blame for failure to peacefully resolve the slave issue in part on the slowness of the “the church” to apply the gospel to the “sin” of slavery, rather than on any impotence of the gospel itself as it spread through revivals.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, he also asserted what in his view was the positive pressure placed on the South by revival preaching and subsequent generation of abolitionist sentiment. The irony of the South’s culpability in starting a war that would destroy the institution it sought to protect was not lost on the evangelist. In these revealing comments, Finney laid blame for the war squarely on southern states for choosing to take up arms against the Union in defense of slavery.

It can also be said that Finney’s criticism assumes opposition to taking up arms against the federal government. It is, therefore, perhaps not too much to tease out of his retrospective analysis the evangelist’s distaste for rebellion against civil authority, despite his earlier admitted sympathies for John Brown’s zeal. Finney’s conflicted feelings—for antislavery zeal and against civil rebellion—illustrates a much longer and broader history of northern evangelical vacillations on the subject of submission to civil authority, a history better understood in the context of their ongoing commitment to biblical authority and their desire to construct American identity on the basis of Protestant evangelical Christianity.

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<sup>6</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals*, 290.

<sup>7</sup> In this context, when he referred to “the church,” Finney meant professing or believing Christianity as opposed to any single denomination or congregation of Christians.

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